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The Cardinal's Musketeer ~



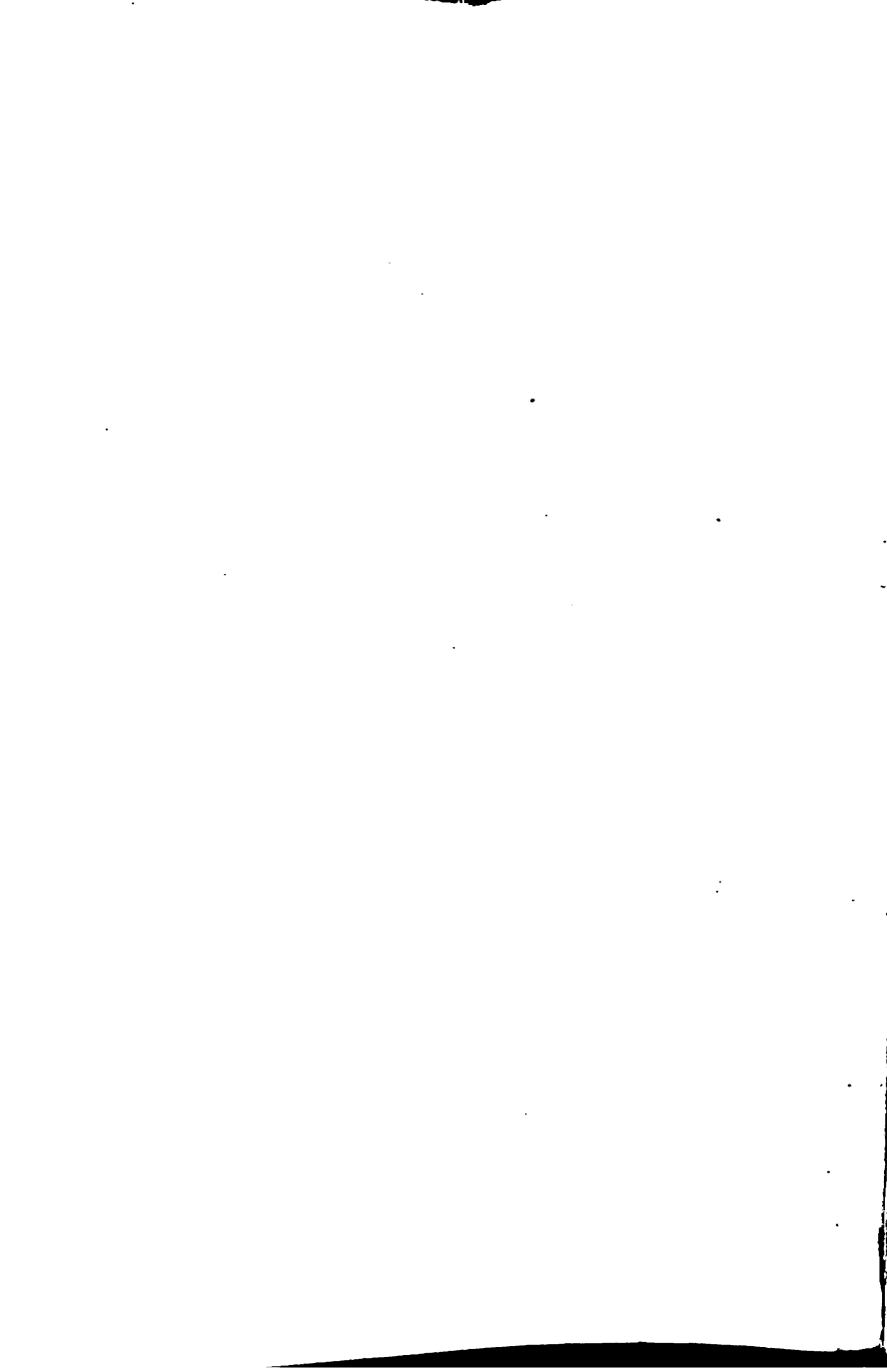
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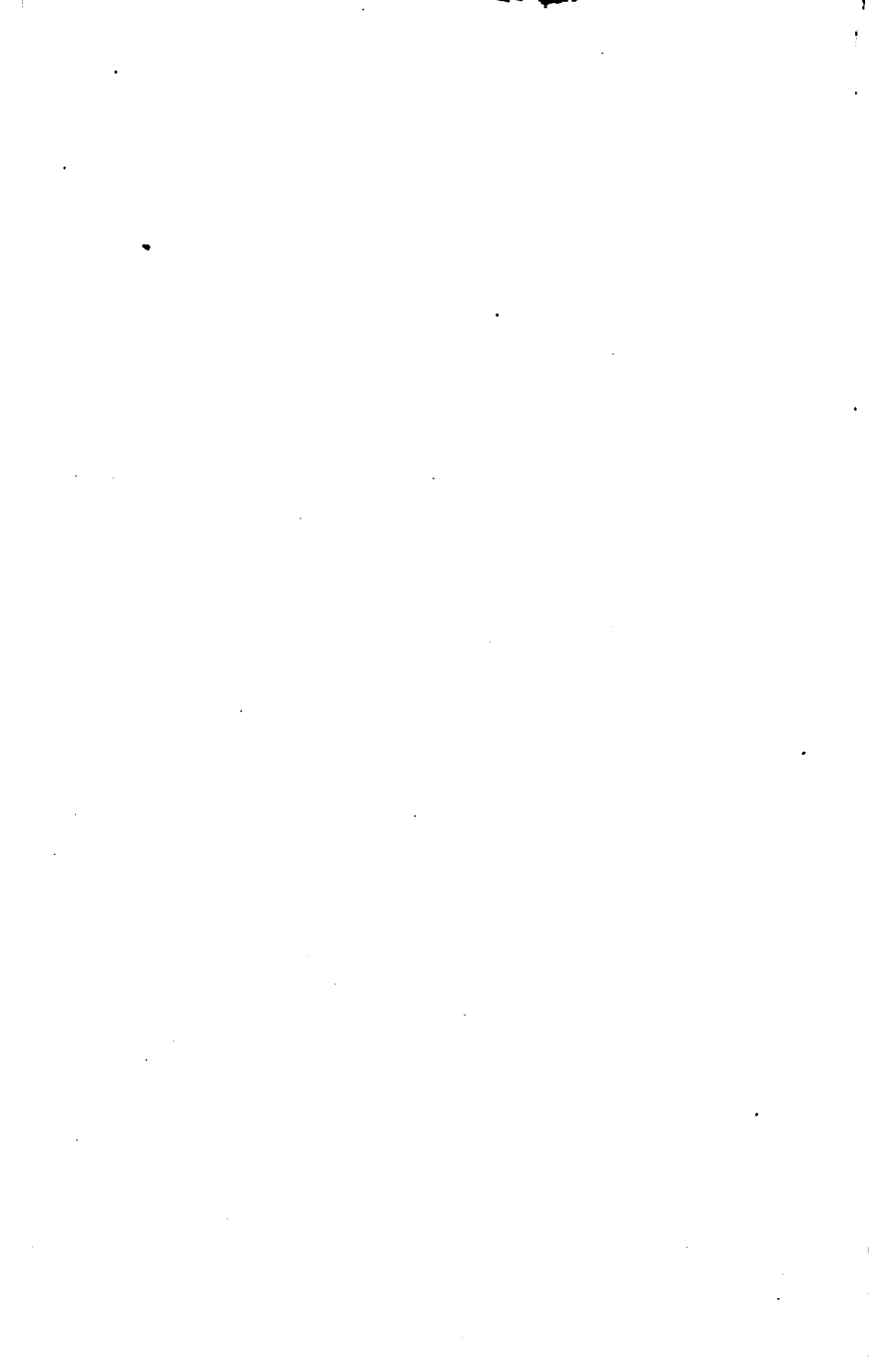
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THE
MILL'S MUSKETEER

BY

M. MELAY TAYLOR

AUTHOR OF

"THE MILL'S MUSKETEER" AND "THE MILL'S MUSKETEER"
OF THE HOUSE OF THE MILL



CHICAGO

MCCLELLAN & CO.

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THE
CARDINAL'S MUSKETEER

BY
M. IMLAY TAYLOR
AUTHOR OF

"ON THE RED STAIRCASE," "AN IMPERIAL LOVER," "A YANKEE
VOLUNTEER," "THE HOUSE OF THE WIZARD"



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The Cardinal's Musketeer

CHAPTER I

THE CLOCKMAKER'S SHOP

ON the Rue de la Ferronnerie, near the end of the Rue St. Honoré, where Henri Quatre was stabbed, stood the clockmaker's shop. In the days of the thirteenth Louis, the streets of Paris were narrow; the windows of one dwelling peeped curiously into those of its opposite neighbor, and especially was this true of the old Rue de la Ferronnerie and of the shop of Jacques des Horloges, the famous clockmaker, at the sign of Ste. Geneviève. It was shop and house united, the upper story overhanging the lower, and under the eaves of the gabled roof the swallows built their nests. It was a quaint little house, the weather stains upon its front and the narrow windows speaking plainly of its antiquity. The strong oak door, black with age, had iron clamps which formed crosses at the top and bottom, while in an alcove above was a rough stone image of Ste. Geneviève.

Within, on the lower floor there were three rooms; the one in front was the shop, next to this was the living-room for the clockmaker's family, and in the rear the kitchen. In the second story there were three small apartments, and above these again was the attic in the gabled roof. From the interior of the house this garret could be reached only by a ladder, put through a trap-door in the floor; but there was another entrance by a stone staircase which ascended to the roof on the outside of the house, from the court in the rear. From these steps two doors opened into the interior, one at the second story and one, a small one, in the roof; the first was frequently opened, the latter was always securely fastened.

The family of the clockmaker was small; it consisted of only three persons and the great gray cat, called M. de Turenne. There were Jacques des Horloges, properly called Jacques Michel, a man of middle age and a master of his trade; his wife, an excellent woman; and one adopted child, the boy Péron. To this child, the long narrow room which constituted the shop, was a chamber furnished with as many marvels as any grotto of fairy lore. Jacques Michel, who had supplied the clocks for the Louvre, who regulated the great clock on the tower of the old Palais de Cité, the first clock that ever told the hours in

Paris, and who could make watches like the famous "Nuremberg eggs," had a marvellous collection in his shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie. There were many greater and wiser than little Péron' who contemplated these elaborate pieces of mechanism with amazement. Horology had advanced by strides since the days when the caliph Aroun-al-Raschid presented the famous water-clock to Charlemagne; yet Jacques Michel did not scorn to imitate that curious machine, and one of his clocks, which especially delighted Péron, had, too, twelve horsemen, armed cap-a-pie, who appeared at twelve doors beneath the dial when the hour was struck. Here, too, in a dim corner stood a miniature of the great jacquemart of Dijon, which Philip the Bold of Burgundy carried away in carts from Courtray, the fruit of his victory at Rosbecque. In solemn rows upon either side of the shop, and in double tiers at the ends, stood tall clocks and short clocks, old-fashioned and new; here were clocks with the old steel spring enclosed in a little barrel, and others with the fusee with its catgut attachment; and here were some of the first with weights and flies. On the right was one with the signs of the zodiac on its face; to the left stood another on which perched a golden rooster, who crowed when the hour struck. There was one also, with silver

doors below its solemn face, which opened to reveal the images of the Virgin and St. Elizabeth. There were watches, too, so diminutive that the child never ceased to marvel that they could tell the time; in a cabinet was a watch, shaped like a cross and set with jewels, said to be the one worn by M. de Guise when he was stabbed in the presence of Henri III. Here, too, was a watch set in a ring, which struck the hours; and here was the almond-shaped timepiece carried by two of the house of Valois and discarded, to come at last into the clockmaker's hands; and here were marvellous little pieces of mechanism which set in motion figures of the Virgin, the apostles, and the saints. The clockmakers of Paris occupied a dignified position, protected by the statutes of Louis XI. and Francis I. They enjoyed rights and privileges of their own; nor could a man become a master of the trade unless he had served eight years as an apprentice and produced a *chef-d'œuvre* under the eyes of an inspector of the corporation. Jacques des Horloges was a past master of the art, and he had accumulated a sufficient fortune to gratify his taste for these antique and wonderful machines. Many of the timepieces in his quaint shop were kept continually in motion, and the soft tick and the loud tick rapped out their noisy contention hour after hour; the cock

crew, the jacquemart struck the silver bell, and the twelve horsemen rode out, to the entertainment and delight of the lonely child, who sat day after day gazing at these marvels, and telling himself stories of what the clocks said to one another. He and the great cat, M. de Turenne, seemed to find their chief amusement in this occupation. Péron told himself that the deep-toned jacquemart was a great warrior, and that the Image de Notre Dame had the voice of a saint; and away over in the corner his quick ear heard the little voice of M. de Guise crying out that he was slain. The child was full of fancies, and many a tale he wove from the talk of the clocks. It was his custom whenever he crossed the Pont Neuf to go and look at the Tour de l'Horloge of the Palais de Cité, for to him the face of that clock had many expressions: when it smiled, little Péron was happy; when it frowned, he was sure to have ill luck. It was only the overgrown imagination of a solitary child, for the boy was very solitary; his only companions were Jacques Michel and his wife, his only playmate M. de Turenne. At this time he was eight years old, a handsome, sturdy, little fellow with a rosy face and golden brown hair, a thoughtful expression in his large dark eyes, and the sober, old-fashioned manners of a child who lived chiefly with his seniors and whose play was

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of the most sober sort. Although Jacques des Horloges was the possessor of a comfortable fortune, little Péron was plainly dressed; his short jacket was usually a well-worn blue taffety, and his breeches were of coarse wool, except on Sundays and saint-days, when he had the honor of appearing in a complete suit of black taffety with a collar of heavy lace. There was a still greater distinction reserved for Easter and Christmas, — a hat with a long curled plume, and then Péron felt that even Monsieur was not more grandly arrayed. At such times the child felt a certain shyness even of M. de Turenne, and walked about stiffly until the solemn occasion was past and he was at home again in the old blue jacket. Little Péron was scarcely known to the visitors to the shop, although Jacques Michel had many grand patrons, from the queen to the Prince de Condé. Great ladies came there in their coaches and descended the carriage steps, assisted by liveried footmen, entering the shop with the rustle of marvellous satin and brocade gowns, little velvet cloaks on their shoulders and great ruffs of lace standing up to their ears. They moved about admiring, wondering, criticising; one loved the clock that was inlaid with gold, another wanted only the Valois watch, which was not for sale. All the while they furnished rare enter-

tainment to the wondering child, who crept back between the tiers of clocks and watched them secretly, because he liked to look at their pretty faces and beautiful clothing; but he detested the airs with which they noticed him if he came out from the hiding-place. They either had haughty glances for him or condescending pleasantry, and the child, who was shy and proud, fled from both. He only peeped out at the great dames surreptitiously, and wove fanciful romances about them as he did about the beloved clocks which were his playfellows. And he saw all the beauties of the Marais; the Princesse de Condé came there, and Leonora Galigai, the favorite of Marie de' Medici, and Catherine de Vivonne, and Mademoiselle de Montmorency, and even the Princesse Marguerite of Lorraine. Little Péron knew them all by sight, and he told the cat, M. de Turenne, in confidence, his opinion of each; but there was one visitor, an infrequent one it is true, but still a visitor, who made the child shrink back yet farther with his cat in his arms. This was a man whose very presence seemed to change the atmosphere of the shop, and who was received with great courtesy by Jacques des Horloges; a priest, clad in the habit of a bishop, with a pale, keen, Italian face, his eyes having a brilliance and penetration which always startled the child.

Péron was not the only one, however, who was fascinated by the presence of the future ruler of France, Armand Jean du Plessis, Bishop of Luçon. The boy shrank and yet was attracted, creeping after awhile into some position of vantage where he could watch the pale, haughty face, the handsome, slender hands, the wonderful, dark eyes; but the bishop never saw his small admirer. Indeed, Péron had a reason besides his shyness for avoiding the customers; he felt instinctively that he was not wanted at such times. Jacques Michel seldom called upon the child for any service, and even dismissed him roughly in the presence of these visitors from the Marais. When more humble callers were there, he was unheeded, but the arrival of a nobleman was often the signal for his departure. Yet at other seasons the boy was not only kindly treated, but was privileged beyond other children of his years and condition. His hands were soft and white, for he had never been called upon for any menial service, and seldom even for errands; his bed was soft, and the clothing upon it was finer and more luxurious than that on the bed of Madame Michel herself. He had the little room next the workshop, because the rear apartment on the second floor, the one which opened on the stairs from the court, was full of apprentices. Péron's room had a bit of

tapestry on the wall, the picture of a stag hunt — the stag pulled down by a savage dog and the hunters in full career toward it; and there was a white curtain in his window, and over his bed was a silver crucifix. He had, too, a tiny square of Arras carpet on the floor, and a velvet cushion on which he kneeled to count his beads. He enjoyed the best at table, also: many a dainty found its way to his plate which was not shared either by the clockmaker or his wife; yet he was not indulged in all directions. He was kept indoors when he longed to run out in the sunshine and play with the children of the Rue de la Ferronnerie; he was forbidden playmates of his own age, and he seldom went anywhere except to the Rue de Bethisi to learn his lessons from Père Antoine, a truly sober diversion. At first he rebelled against these rules, but after awhile he accepted them, and turned for consolation to M. de Turenne and the jacquemarts. He peopled his world with fanciful personages, among whom there always moved a slender figure clad in a bishop's robe. He was an observant child, and studied everything about him, watching the apprentices for hours and making endless little models of clocks out of paper or wax, — a dull life for a child certainly, yet not an unhappy one, for he was naturally dreamy and old for

his age, and he had no troubles. No one crossed him, he had never received a blow in the whole course of his existence, and never a sharp word, except in the presence of Jacques Michel's great visitors. As for Madame Michel, he was—though he knew it not—the very apple of her eye, and it was one of her chief joys to train the soft, golden brown curls on the boy's head. Many an hour did she spend washing and pinning out on a cushion the great lace collar he wore on fête days, and she sighed in secret over the linen one, and the worn blue taffety jacket of daily wear.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET OF THE GARRET

THE little Péron enjoyed every privilege of the clockmaker's house, but there was one spot in it which he had never entered. That was the garret under the gabled roof. It was not forbidden him, perhaps because the mere prohibition was unnecessary, when it was impossible to penetrate that mysterious corner. For mysterious it was, not only to Péron, but also to the apprentices; and there was no little gossip about the closely fastened door in the roof, and the child heard it when he wandered into the workshop to watch the men manufacturing the marvellous machinery for his well-beloved jacquemarts. No one went to that garret but Madame Michel, and she went only at stated intervals; entering sometimes by the outer staircase, but more frequently by the ladder which went up to the trap-door in the ceiling of her own room. When she was up there, the apprentices always knew it, as well as Péron, for they could hear her steps overhead on the loose boards of the attic floor. What she did

there was the subject of much idle, half-jesting conjecture. It could scarcely be a store-room, for she went up and came down empty-handed; they knew this, for the more curious had surprised her in her entrances and exits more than once. It was suggested that she sought this retired spot for the purpose of devotion, but it was further observed that she was usually out of temper after these excursions, and always belabored with her tongue any one whom she caught spying upon her, which did not support the theory of prayer and meditation. The more simple explanation, that she went there to clean and dust the attic, did not suit them either, although natural enough; for the goodwife was scrupulously neat, and had more than once wrought mischief with her dust brush among the curiosities of the shop, until she had been driven out by Jacques des Horloges.

Many a jest was made about that garret, and when the apprentices found that little Péron shared their curiosity, they were only too ready to fill his mind with wonderful tales. The child began after awhile to feel a certain awe mingled with his interest in the secret chamber. The men amused themselves telling him of the hobgoblins who lived under the roof and blew the smoke down the chimneys into the house on days when they were angry. They dressed them up to please their

own fancy and amaze the boy. Sometimes the goblins were little and grotesque and lived on eggs stolen from the swallows' nests under the eaves; again they were large and fat, and sat squat on the ground like toads, and devoured only curious little boys who peeped into their dens in the attics. Again, they told him that the queen of the fairies lived there and ate nothing but cream of clouds à la Zamet. And so the garret became a wonderland to Péron, and he dreaded to see it as much as he longed to explore, with all a boy's eager fancy for adventure. He was a sober-minded child, too, although so fanciful, and he did not altogether believe the tales that were told him. However, between belief and unbelief, his curiosity waxed strong, and he made many expeditions up the stone stairs from the court to try the handle of the door in the roof; but it was never unfastened, although he sat in the court below and watched it often. Nor was his success better with the trap-door; he could not reach this to try it, for the ladder was always locked up in a closet, except on the auspicious days when Madame Michel ascended. He asked once to accompany her, and was refused more sharply than he had ever been refused any favor before. He was not a child to fret or cry because of a denied pleasure; he neither repeated the

request nor asked the cause of the refusal, but accepted the rissole that madame gave him, on her return, as an apology and peace offering. Indeed, all the rest of that day she was unusually indulgent and apologetic to him, and in the evening took him to the pastry shop of Archambault on the Rue des Petits Champs to purchase some of his favorite bonbons and a marvellous dove of sugar, with green eyes which sparkled like jewels. Yet, although she was unaware of it, she had not propitiated him, for the desire of his heart was now, boylike, to see the attic. He pattered along at her side without revealing his thoughts, however; and a strange couple they were on the streets. The good dame was Norman French, a Rouennaise by birth, and a big, broad-shouldered woman with a keen, brown eye and a pleasant, broad face, her black hair brushed smoothly back under her wide-winged white cap; and her dress was that of a well-to-do tradesman's wife, and withal scrupulously neat. But there was no beauty about her, while about the child there were both beauty and grace of movement. Even in his plain clothes his little figure was striking, and he had a fine, fully developed head for his years. His reserve, his quaint air of dignity, were unlike the manners of the children at play in the streets. Indeed, he had a fixity of purpose which was to

prove troublesome to Madame Michel. He accepted her blandishments—but he remembered the attic.

One fair day his opportunity came, as all things come to him who waits. Jacques des Horloges was busy in the shop, the apprentices were deeply engaged on a large clock for M. de Rambuteau, and the cat, M. de Turenne, ran away from Péron and hid. The child hunted for his playmate with the zeal born of idleness, and finding the rooms below empty, he clambered up the stairs to the upper floor. When he came to Madame Michel's room he stood transfixed at the open door. The ladder was at the trap, and he heard madame's voice in the court, engaged in shrill altercation with a peddler. The child could scarcely believe his eyes. M. de Turenne was forgotten; here was something of far greater interest. He advanced cautiously, not because he felt himself a transgressor, but because he was awed at the possible revelation which lay before him. His heart beat as he set his small foot on the first rung of the ladder, and then he drew back. The stories of the hobgoblins beset him with strange misgivings; he fancied that he heard a soft sound overhead; he hesitated, and a little tremor of excitement ran over him. What would he see up there? Ah, that was the question! He reflected, however,

that he would like to see a hobgoblin, and he did not believe that they ate little boys. He was screwing up his courage, admitting to himself that the possibilities were ugly. But curiosity is a strong motive power, and the child was no coward, if over-imaginative, as children so brought up are likely to be. He wavered only a moment or two; decisive action was necessary before Madame Michel returned. He took his life in his hand and climbed the ladder like a young hero; he did not pause again until he reached the floor of the attic, for fear his courage might fail. At the top he drew his breath and stood still; it took a few minutes for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, for there was only one window in the roof, and that a small one. Then he looked about him with a sharp sense of disappointment, for he saw nothing, — that is, nothing of interest to a child. It was a very small room indeed, with the naked rafters above, and, strange to say, in spite of madame's neatness, a cobweb or two festooned the corners. The window in the roof revealed the rough boards of the floor and nothing more except three large plain chests of solid wood standing in a row on one side. A barren spot to have excited so much curiosity, and certainly not a promising home for hobgoblins. Péron's first impulse was to go down the ladder again, but he

thought better of it and began to move about the attic, examining it until he assured himself that there was nothing to be seen except the chests. Having arrived at this conclusion, he betook himself to these; he tried the lid of the one nearest the trap door, but it defied even the industrious efforts of little fingers, and he turned away, disappointed and piqued. The next was equally unaccommodating, although he devoted more time to it; he found the lock and applied his eye to it, in a fruitless effort to see inside. Curiosity now was whetted by defeat and he approached the third, his little face more rosy than usual and his lips pinched tightly together. He was destined to succeed at last; the first touch assured him that the lid was unlocked, and he put out all his child's strength to lift it and peep in. Again a disappointment; he saw only some neatly folded clothing; but something in the color and appearance attracted him and he pursued his investigations. With infinite care and labor he lifted the lid upright and turned it back on its hinges, then stood gazing with pleased eyes at the objects revealed. Nothing very unusual, only the small clothing of a child of two or three years old, but of a quality and color so delicate that little Péron examined them in wonder. They were as beautiful as the gowns of the belles of the Marais.

The chest was closely packed, but the boy got no deeper than the upper layer. Here was a little coat of the palest blue, and Péron knew that it was of velvet and satin, and the lace on it seemed to him like the frost-work that he had sometimes seen on the windows at Christmas. He fingered it gently, for he was a careful child, and the tiny roses in the pattern delighted him. It was while he was examining them that he felt something cold touch his exploring fingers, and a tiny chain of gold slipped out from the folds with a locket on the end of it. His attention was at once absorbed by this new object of interest; it was small and round, and Péron thought it was the brightest piece of red glass that he had ever seen. On it was engraved a very curious picture, — curious to him, at least, — a little lion rampant, a wreath or a scroll, and some figures which he could not decipher. He did not know what it was, but he took it nearer the window, when he discovered that the light made it sparkle. The chain did not interest him, and he gently worked at the links until he accidentally detached it, and then he dropped the chain back into the chest and stood shifting the stone in his fingers to catch the changes of light. He remembered seeing one such stone before, — he thought it was on the neck of the Duchess of Rohan, — and he was

delighted with his discovery. It was still in the little nervous fingers when Madame Michel came suddenly up the ladder, having approached unheard while he was fascinated with his bit of red glass. At first the good dame did not see the invader of her sanctum, and when she did, she discovered the open chest at the same instant and came forward with an outcry that frightened the child so much that he drew back, clasping his treasure tightly to his breast, and gazing at her angry face in mute, wide-eyed alarm.

"*Mère de Dieu!*" she cried, running to the open box, and looking in with feverish anxiety, "what have you done, you little rogue?"

She examined the clothes with fierce scrutiny, but she could detect no disturbance of their neat folds, for Péron had handled them so delicately that no harm was done. She slammed down the lid, and, locking it, thrust the key in her bosom before she turned to the child. Her anger was slightly mollified, but there was still some agitation in her face and manner, and she gazed searchingly at the offender.

"How long have you been here?" she demanded sharply.

The boy was still alarmed by her unusual conduct, and he kept the bit of red glass tight in his little fist.

"I do not know," he said, shaking his head; "I was looking for M. de Turenne, I —"

"Mon Dieu!" cried madame, looking about behind the boxes, "is that beast here? If he had got into the chest, he would have torn up everything."

"He is not here," replied Péron soberly. "I could not find him, and I came up the ladder."

"What did you want to come up here for?" asked the woman suspiciously, having satisfied herself that M. de Turenne was not in hiding.

"I wanted to see the hobgoblins," rejoined the child calmly, his agitation departing as her anger subsided.

Madame looked at him in amazement, her eyes very round.

"Ciel! the boy is mad," she said to herself softly, and then aloud, "You are dreaming, mon enfant, what do you mean? There are no hobgoblins in this house."

"Mais oui, madame!" exclaimed the child wisely, "there are, here under the roof; they said so;" and he pointed downward.

"They?" repeated the good woman, bewildered; "who are 'they'?"

"Jehan and Pierre, the apprentices, and Manchette, too," he replied; "it must be true!"

"Ah!" ejaculated madame sharply; "so they gossip about this place, do they?"

Gossip was a long word for little Péron; he wrinkled his brows.

"They told me of the hobgoblins," he repeated stoutly.

Madame Michel's face cleared a little.

"Ah, only nonsense to frighten the child!" she exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. "Sainte Geneviève! I thought—" But she did not finish the sentence; she laid a heavy hand on Péron's shoulder.

"Listen to me," she said, in a sharp, clear tone. "I have never whipped you, *mon enfant*, but if you say one word of this attic to Jehan, Pierre, Manchette, or any one else, I will surely whip you, Péron, and you shall have no dinner; neither shall you go to the Rue des Petits Champs; — do you understand me, eh?"

Péron looked up at her red face and his childish courage quaked; but he was a proud child, and he inwardly resolved that he would never bear a blow — he would run away first.

"Why do you not speak?" she cried angrily; "you hear me, *enfant*!"

"I will not tell, madame," the boy answered gravely, "but you will not whip me!"

She let go of him, amazed at the look on his face, an expression of almost shame coming over hers. She knelt down on the garret floor and kissed the child's hand, the picture of humility.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur," she said, tears in her voice; "you are right, I will not whip you."

There were tears in her eyes also. A moment later she rose, and brushed the moisture from her eyelashes with the back of her broad, strong hand.

"I am an old fool!" she said, giving the boy a push toward the ladder; "go away, mon enfant, there is nothing here but some old chests, old clothes, and old hopes!"

At this moment her eyes fell on the form of M. de Turenne, who was sitting placidly at the top of the ladder, licking his gray fur, the end of his tail moving in a charmed circle.

"Scat!" she cried, stamping her feet, "between the cat and the child I shall go mad," and she drove them both down the ladder and slammed down the door after them.

All the while the piece of red glass had remained tightly clasped in Péron's hand. In his agitation he had held it unconsciously, and now he was afraid to tell Madame Michel, dreading a repetition of the scene. He crept away with it to his own little room and examined it with a tremor of excitement. It was so pretty, and it had so nearly precipitated a terrible calamity; for he felt that had madame struck him, he should have died of shame. He was afraid to return the stone and

afraid to play with it, and it became a fresh cause for embarrassment. However, he finally solved the problem by determining to hide it away. In a little cupboard in the corner of his room there was one shelf devoted to his treasures, — wax and paper models of jacquemarts, broken watch-springs, some fancifully shaped pebbles, a number of marvellously useless valuables, and here Madame Michel never meddled. Therefore he loved it with the pride of sole proprietorship, and here in a dark corner he stowed away the bit of red glass wrapped in a soiled sheet of paper. For a few days he took it out surreptitiously and played with it, and then he forgot it and it lay there unheeded and unsought; for as yet Madame Michel had not discovered her loss.

CHAPTER III

PÈRE ANTOINE

AFTER Péron had gratified his curiosity in regard to the garret and found it such a bare and unprofitable spot, he speedily forgot it, and only once again during his childhood was he to startle Madame Michel with the mention of it. This was on the occasion of a conversation which took place some months later in the shop. The house at the sign of Ste. Geneviève was too small to harbor any of the apprentices at night, so after work hours they took their departure, leaving the members of the little family to themselves. As none of his patrons ever visited him in the evening, Jacques des Horloges was then at liberty to entertain his personal friends. The clockmaker was a quiet man, not much addicted to conviviality, and he had few visitors at such times, occupying himself frequently with studies connected with his work or in straightening his accounts. It was the family custom in the evening to gather around the table in the living-room, which was cheerfully lighted with tapers. Madame Michel

was always knitting, her needles flying with marvellous celerity, while her eyes were equally alert in observing Péron and M. de Turenne. Jacques des Horloges was a broad-shouldered, stalwart-looking man, a native of Picardy, his rugged face and honest, kindly eye commending him to the observer. He had a powerful build for one of his profession, and looked better suited to bear the sword than to wind the machinery of delicate watches. His dress was suited to his station in life and showed no signs of the fortune which, it was whispered, he had accumulated. His only ornament was a chain of gold around his neck which supported a tiny, cruciform watch, so ingeniously manufactured that it not only struck the hours but showed also the day of the month.¹

It was on one of these evenings, when Jacques and his wife and little Péron sat around the table, that a knock at the shop door disturbed the quiet scene. Madame Michel rose and went to answer it, still knitting, even when she walked across the dimly lighted shop, not even dropping a stitch as she made her way between the tiers of clocks. When she opened the door she curtsied low and greeted the visitor with reverence as well as affection. A moment later she returned to the

¹ Watches striking the hour and moving symbolic figures were manufactured as early as the sixteenth century.

living-room conducting a tall, thin man wearing the plain black habit of a priest, — a man of middle age, stooping slightly in his bearing and with a face of unusual sweetness and refinement of expression. Michel greeted the new-comer with as much cordiality as his wife had shown; and even little Péron ran to draw forward a chair for him, while the cat rubbed himself against his cassock with evident affection. There are some persons to whom all animals turn with instinctive trust and affection, and there is no better sign, as there is no worse than the aversion shown to others. The instinct of an animal is more unerring than human perception: it recognizes both brutes and traitors.

The priest smiled an equal welcome upon all, but there was perplexity in his blue eyes. He sat down and laid his broad-brimmed hat on the table and clasped his hands on his knee; and he had handsome hands, slender and nervous, with delicate finger-tips. His face was pale, with lines about the thin lips and under the large eyes, showing care, anxiety, midnight vigils; he had the face of a student, and the hair, already gray at the back of his head, was white on the temples. His gaze rested now on the child, who, having seated the visitor, had resumed his own place on the floor, where he was cutting out a paper clock.

The priest watched him attentively, while Jacques des Horloges and his wife waited in respectful silence for him to open the conversation. Something about little Péron interested Père Antoine so much that it was some moments before he looked up, and when he did, it was with a grave face.

"I have strange tidings," he said softly, glancing from Jacques to his wife. "M. de Bruneau has been arrested and will be condemned to death."

Michel stared at him in blank amazement, and madame uttered a cry and dropped her knitting-needles. The priest made a sign with his hand toward the child on the floor, and it had its effect at once; both his auditors restrained their agitation.

"I cannot understand," Jacques des Horloges said. "What was his offence? Not a plot against the king, surely?"

"Ay," Père Antoine replied soberly, "something of that sort, although a much exaggerated charge, manufactured, I fear, by his enemies. He was taken on the Rue St. Denis, on information furnished by one high in the favor of Albert de Luynes."

"Who is he?" asked Michel eagerly.

The priest glanced again at the child.

"It is M. de Nançay," he said, in a low voice; "one of the witnesses against the accused is his cousin, Lemoigne de Marsou."

"Ah!" ejaculated Jacques des Horloges, nodding his head slowly.

"A trap, of course, mon père," Madame Michel exclaimed, leaning forward in her interest, her knitting forgotten.

"It would seem so," Père Antoine replied thoughtfully. "M. de Bruneau was led into making some admission. There has been too much sharp practice in tracing plotters. I truly believe that de Bruneau may be innocent of all treason, but it cannot be proved. Since his majesty reached his majority, madame his mother has been discontented with her position. She cannot accept any place but the first. She has ruled so long during the king's childhood that she is not willing to give up. It is said publicly by her partisans that she has been admitted to the council merely for the sake of appearances and has no voice in anything, though her name is used, and the people hold her responsible for affairs in which she has no part. The young men of her party are therefore constantly plotting to reinstate her in authority, and her jealousy of her son fosters these intrigues both here and in her court at Blois. It is some affair of this kind in

which de Bruneau is implicated, but I think that M. de Nançay is far more likely to have burned his fingers than this young man."

"It is strange," remarked Jacques des Horloges; "M. de Bruneau is the last man of whom I should expect such disloyalty; he could not have been in his senses."

"He says that he had been drinking when the confession was forced from him," Père Antoine rejoined; "it was at Archambault's pastry shop."

"You have seen him, then?" asked Madame Michel eagerly.

"I went immediately to the Châtelet," the priest replied; "I found him much as I expected. He has not the fortitude to meet such a calamity."

"He has powerful patrons, mon père," the good wife said; "is there no hope of intercession?"

The priest shook his head.

"None," he answered; "there have been too many plots, too many intrigues; they will make an example of him. The whole weight of the Marquis de Nançay's influence, never greater than now, will be thrown into the scale against the prisoner."

"Ay," remarked Michel sternly, "'t is his opportunity to be rid of a troublesome rival, and marvellously well planned too, if I mistake not."

"I fear so," said Père Antoine thoughtfully;

"it has worked out strangely, at least. Certainly, M. de Bruneau's death is in his favor."

"I am sorry for the accused," said the clock-maker; "I remember him from a lad of twelve. 'T is a sad end for a young man and a soldier. Did you tell him aught of that matter whereof we spoke before?" he added, glancing anxiously at the priest.

Père Antoine shook his head. "Nay," he answered. "How would it profit us? He is as good as a dead man, so could not aid us if he would, and I have never been sure that he would. He is a feather-brain, and we cannot put so weighty a matter into idle or desperate hands. He cannot aid us, but he might work us some mischief with his careless tongue even now. I deemed it best that he should die in ignorance of that which would not serve him, and might harm others."

"I have felt much as you do, father," Michel rejoined, after a moment's silence; "once or twice he came here to the shop, talking with me freely, yet I did not wholly trust him. He seemed to me a harebrained, ambitious young man, desiring nothing so much as his own aggrandizement and not likely to welcome the thought that one stood ahead of him upon the road to name and fortune."

The priest did not immediately reply; he was leaning forward and fingering out a silent piece of music on the table with his slender fingers.

"There might have been some question as to his claim," he said thoughtfully; "in a case like this, where there is confiscation, he might have had a better chance than the true heir."

Madame Michel drew her breath deeply, clasping her hands to her bosom.

"The finger of God is in it!" she exclaimed devoutly.

"His hand directs all things," Père Antoine returned quietly; "it is our blindness which does not recognize it."

There was another pause, and in it Madame Michel surreptitiously wiped a tear from her eyes. The regular throbbing tick of the clocks sounded distinctly from the shop, and little Péron began to doze, with his head on the low stool in the corner; it was past his bedtime, but he was forgotten.

"When will M. de Bruneau be tried?" asked Jacques des Horloges, at last.

"Immediately," Père Antoine replied; "'t is a well established case; there are several witnesses, all relatives of M. le Marquis."

"Sent purposely, no doubt," exclaimed madame indignantly. "The old rogue!"

"I am sorry for the poor gentleman," Michel said once more; "he is like to have a short shrift. Will you see him again, mon père?"

"I have a permit from the king," the priest replied, "and I shall stay with the unhappy prisoner to the end. There is absolutely no earthly hope, and I fear M. de Bruneau has never set great store by the heavenly."

As he spoke, he rose from his seat to leave them, and the movement startled Péron, who opened his sleepy eyes just as the priest glanced in his direction.

"The child has been asleep," Père Antoine remarked, smiling. "How great a blessing is the unconscious freedom from care! I had well nigh forgotten your present, Péron," he added, thrusting his hand into his wallet and drawing out a pale blue silk handkerchief; "I brought this for you, little one, because you begged for a silk handkerchief the other day."

The child was wide-awake now and came running to the priest, all eagerness for the small bit of silk in Père Antoine's outstretched hand.

"Oh, madame, it is just like the beautiful silk in the chest in the garret!" Péron cried, delighted; "the same pale blue—but it is not so thick and glossy!" he added, on examination.

At the child's words both men glanced quickly at Madame Michel, whose face flushed scarlet.

"Hush, Péron!" she exclaimed angrily, "you do not know what you say."

"How is this, mother?" asked Jacques des Horloges gravely.

She laughed a little, her agitation giving way to a milder feeling.

"I left the ladder down and the little rogue is as active as a cat and more curious," she said, apologetically.

Père Antoine smiled, laying his hand softly on the child's curls.

"The likeness to his father grows daily," he remarked to Jacques; "do you not see it?"

"I try to think it is in my eyes," rejoined the clockmaker bluntly; "it is like to do him more mischief than good."

"He is in higher hands than ours," replied the priest sadly, making a sign as though he blessed the child, before he bade them good-night and went on his solemn errand to the Châtelet.

CHAPTER IV

THE PASTRY SHOP ON THE RUE DES PETITS CHAMPS

IT was one of Péron's few privileges to pay an occasional visit to the pastry shop of his friend Archambault. A privilege which he prized most highly when he could go without Madame Michel, because he was then certain to be the recipient of various little gifts of sweetmeats, of which he did not receive so large a share in her presence. But the permission to go alone was so rare that it was scarcely obtained in a twelve-month, and then only when the goodwife was so occupied that she could not spare the time either to make or to fetch some dainty for the dinner of Jacques des Horloges. But it was only a few weeks after Père Antoine's evening visit that one of these rare opportunities presented itself, and little Péron trotted off as fast as his sturdy legs could carry him to the Rue des Petits Champs. He was clad in his every-day clothes, and his taffety jacket was beginning to show threadbare spots at the elbows; but his apparel did not dis-

guise the child's native grace, and his dark eyes shone with happiness. He walked swiftly, not stopping to speak to any one, ignoring the children at play, according to his instructions, and clasping a livre tightly in his rosy fist; for madame had bidden him be careful of it and bring her the change, and he knew well that she made much ado over the careless spending of a denier or a sou. It was a great thing for him to be trusted with so stupendous a sum as a whole silver livre, and he felt the responsibility, resisting the temptation to disobey orders and stop to watch the youngsters at play in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, which was right in his way. With a strong appreciation of his own virtues, he kept straight upon his course, and arrived at the pastry shop, above the door of which swung the sign of Les Trois Champignons. In this establishment there were two rooms, — the outer one, which Péron entered, furnished with a long counter in front of the kitchen door, and full of small tables for the accommodation of a motley crowd of visitors; and the inner apartment, on the opposite side from the kitchen, which was for the entertainment of persons of consequence. No one was more quick to recognize the most ethereal differences in rank or social degree than Archambault, the cook, and like all vulgar people

he was noisy in his eagerness to serve the rich and the great; yet — with all the faults natural to his class — the honest fellow had a good heart, and fed the poor at his back door as liberally as he fed the rich at his front. For which he was not to blame, as it is a common fault of human nature to prefer to receive the poor at the back door. St. Teresa and her two sous had the help of God, but doubtless she would have had a low seat at the pastry cook's.

When little Péron entered the shop, the outer room was well filled with guests, scattered in groups at the various tables. The greater number of them were soldiers, and there was a good deal of noisy talk and laughter. The attendants were moving about at a rapid pace, endeavoring to fulfil the demands made on them from every quarter, and there was no one behind the counter when the boy reached it. A little embarrassed by the crowd and the noise, the child stood waiting for some one to attend to his wants, watching meanwhile the groups nearest at hand. At a table close by sat three young soldiers wearing the dress of musketeers. They had reached a course of sweetmeats and pastry, which they were washing down with a liberal supply of good red wine. A soldier is always interesting to a boy, and little Péron gazed at these men with eager curiosity; their rich uni-

forms, their fiercely curled moustaches, their polished accoutrements, all pleased his eye. After awhile, a few words of their conversation attracted his attention, and he listened trying to understand, for the name of M. de Bruneau was one that he remembered hearing from Père Antoine. The men were discussing in low tones the trial of the latest political offender; they were talking also of M. de Luynes and of the king, and it seemed as if the fate of de Bruneau, for some reason, excited unusual interest. It was evident that no one quite believed in his guilt, although no one could prove his innocence.

"M. de Bruneau died like a gentleman at noon to-day," remarked one of the musketeers, eating a citron with a certain placid enjoyment of the sweet-meat and his gruesome subject.

"I heard that his knees shook and he was sadly frightened at the sight of the block," said another, shrugging his shoulders.

"Parbleu! I do not blame him," cried the third; "'t is one thing to die in a fight, or even to fall by a sword-thrust on the Place Royale, quite another to walk up to the block to be bled like an ox. No one seems to know what was the full charge against him either, except the accuser."

"Who is a cousin of M. de Nançay, whereby hangs a tale as long as a sermon," said the first speaker.

"And Bruneau was the cousin of the dead marquis, was he not?" asked the second soldier.

"Ay," responded the other, "which is the handle of the tale."

"And M. de Bruneau's property is confiscated?" continued the inquiring soldier.

"Certainly, and that is the gist of the tale!" retorted his companions, laughing.

"His accomplices both escaped," said the first speaker, — "one to England, the other, M. Benoit, to Flanders."

"M. de Bruneau stopped," began one of the others, "to —"

"To bid his sweetheart adieu!" interjected the gayest member of the party, laughing.

"And was taken on the Rue St. Denis by the provost marshal and" — the speaker held his hand over his mouth and pointed at the inner room, — "and M. de Nançay."

"Ventrebleu!" exclaimed the other, "what a pleasant rencounter."

At this they all laughed loudly, and little Péron, who was still watching and listening, wondered what could be so amusing in a subject which seemed to be the same of which Père Antoine had spoken so gravely. The child's wondering gaze attracted the attention of the youngest musketeer, and he mistook the boy's eager attention for a

longing after the sweets on the table, seeing that he was neglected and wore a rather shabby coat. The soldier had eaten well and was in the humor to be not only kind but mischievous. He leaned back in his chair and held out a rissole to Péron.

"Here, Master Bluecoat," he said gayly, "have a tidbit. I have eaten and you are not yet served."

Péron shook his head, drawing back indignantly, but the musketeer did not recognize the meaning of his repugnance.

"Come, come," he said, "no need of shyness; I do not want it, my boy, I have had one bite — and one of my bites is equal to three of yours."

He pressed it upon the child, who retreated still more toward the counter, his little face flushing scarlet. The other two soldiers had now become interested and each held out a sweetmeat laughing, much diverted at the boy's discomfiture.

"Here is a citron," said one.

"And here a tart," cried another, while the first offender still flourished his rissole.

"I do not want them!" exclaimed Péron, now backed against the counter, and looking at them in angry bewilderment.

But they were not to be put off so easily.

"You will miss it, Master Bluecoat," said the soldier with the rissole; "'t is an opportunity not

often found at Archambault's, sweetmeats free of charge! Try my cake, monsieur."

"I do not want what you have tasted!" cried Péron, with disgust.

This sally was greeted with laughter as the astonished guardsman looked blankly at the child. He recovered, however, in an instant, and made the boy a mocking bow.

"I beg your pardon, M. le Marquis!" he said. "Can I not order for your excellency? Archambault does not know who is without."

The jest caught the fancy of his idle companions.

"Give place here at the table," they cried, clearing a space in the dishes; "let the marquis sit!"

Before the child realized their intention, the gay musketeer had picked him up in his arms and set him down in the center of the table.

"Place for the pièce de résistance!" he cried, laughing; "room for M. le Marquis de Rissole!"

Amazed, angry, half frightened, little Péron sat amid the dishes gazing defiantly at his tormentors, too proud to cry, too surprised to attempt an escape, remembering only to hold tightly to Madame Michel's precious livre. Around him the three musketeers gathered, jesting, laughing, making him fanciful obeisances as they offered every dish in turn, as if serving a prince. Their boisterous merriment drew a group of idle spec-

tators, and the child was soon the center of a noisy circle, which constantly widened.

"M. le Marquis, permit me," said his first tormentor, "here are some bouchées à la reine — or here are tartelettes aux confitures."

"And here, your excellency," cried another, "are macarons aux amandes!"

"Coquilles de volaille," said a third, "œufs farcis!"

"Croquettes de ris de veau," said one of the new-comers, "and a roast of hobgoblins, with a sauce aux champignons!"

Amidst this hubbub the child remained silent, his courage was wavering a little, and his small mouth closed tighter as did his clenched fists, but he kept his dark eyes fastened defiantly on the ring of laughing faces. The jest was no jest to him, and it required all his force of will to bear it; but he was too proud to waver, too shy to understand or retort to their rough pleasantry. The table on which he sat was being crowded at the edge with dishes, and the light fell full on his golden brown head and shabby, blue taffety jacket. The color which had come to his face with his first anger had faded with his increasing alarm, and his eyes looked unnaturally large and bright.

The jesters had just begun a fresh assault with cakes and pies, when the door of the inner room

opened and a tall man came slowly out, pausing at the sound of the merriment at the table by the counter, and glancing in that direction with an air of displeasure. He was evidently a person of consequence, as his bearing and the richness of his dress indicated. His face was handsome and severe, and his brow was concealed by a great plumed hat; he wore a collar of rich lace over his velvet coat, and ruffles of lace, two fingers deep, finished his satin breeches at the knee and fell over the wide tops of his boots. He stared haughtily at the laughing circle about the boy, and then his glance alighted on Péron and seemed for the moment arrested by the child's face and figure, and he looked long and attentively at him. There were still many persons at the other tables in the room, and presently the tall stranger began to attract nearly as much notice, though of a respectful kind, as did Péron. But the new-comer heeded no one save the child, and it was evident that the scene did not meet with his approval. At last he moved forward to the edge of the circle of jesters, and as one of the servants approached he spoke to him with an imperative tone and gesture.

"Who is the child?" he demanded sharply.

At the sound of his voice the musketeers and their friends looked about, and seeing him fell back

discomfited; only the little boy remained motionless in his seat on the table, not knowing how to escape.

"Who is that child?" exclaimed the great man again, impatiently.

Some one had warned the chief pastry-cook, and Archambault came hurrying from the kitchens. A glance told him the story, and with a swift movement he swept the little fellow from the table into the background and stood bowing obsequiously to his tall guest.

"Are you all deaf?" exclaimed that personage tartly; "I have asked three times about that boy. Who is he?"

"Only little Péron, M. le Marquis," replied Archambault blandly; "the son of a poor tradesman."

"An ill-mannered cub to make such a scene," remarked the great man haughtily. "I did not know you kept a playhouse, Archambault."

The pastry cook was profuse in his apologies. He was a little round man with a bald spot the size of a poached egg on the back of his round head, he had little round eyes that glistened not unkindly, and even his fingers were as round and plump as croquettes. He made a thousand excuses and waited on M. le Marquis to the door, looking out at the liveried lackeys awaiting his

irritable guest. When he was safely out of hearing, however, Archambault was no longer amiable. He hurried back, and as he passed through the group of musketeers he flourished his hands in frantic gesticulations.

"Morbleu!" he cried, "you will ruin me, you coxcombs! That was M. de Nançay, and he is more ticklish for the proprieties than M. de Luynes! Between your appetites and your manners I shall be a ruined man! If you do not mend your ways, you dogs," he added, shaking his fat fist at them, "I will run you all out with a spit. Mordieu! I shall be outlawed!"

With these words he disappeared into the kitchen, pushing Péron before him, and closing the door sharply behind him.

In spite of Péron's recent alarm and anger, he became at once so interested in the busy scene which opened before his eyes that he almost forgot his troubles; but not so did Archambault. The pastry cook seemed absorbed in thought and took no notice of the cooks and scullions hurrying to and fro with smoking pots and gaudily dressed dishes. He even forgot the child's errand and hurried him through the kitchens, across the court, and into a room which opened at the back of the house on the Rue de Beaujolais. So rapid had been their movements that the bewildered boy did

not recollect Madame Michel's orders until he suddenly bethought himself of the livre still in his hand.

"I have not the tarts," he said, drawing back as Archambault began to unfasten the outer door. The pastry cook stopped and rubbed his head.

"Diable!" he ejaculated, and then after a moment's thought he called to a scullion.

"Gaspard, bring hither some tarts and cakes," he said, "and be quick!"

Péron opened his little fist at last and gravely extended the money.

"You were to take out the price," he said.

The scullion had already hastily filled the order and put the bundle in the small customer's arms but without taking the livre. Archambault meanwhile had thrust his head out from the door and looked anxiously up and down the street; he drew back now and grasped the child by the arm.

"Come!" he said impatiently, as Péron held back.

"I have not paid," the boy protested, stoutly resisting.

"Some other time will do," retorted the fat pastry cook.

"Madame Michel wished the change," replied Péron stubbornly; "that is why she gave me a livre."

"Mon Dieu!" cried Archambault, beside himself with impatience, "quick, Gaspard, the change; this child would wait for change if he bought his own coffin!"

And it was not until this business had been transacted to Péron's satisfaction that he was willing to go out at the door which had been opened for his convenience. But after the livre had been changed he stepped out into the street, closely followed by the pastry cook. There was no one in sight, and Archambault laid his hand on the child's shoulder.

"Now mind you, Péron," he said, with emphasis, "run down to the Rue St. Honoré and so to the shop. No time to dream now, no dallying,—vite!" and he clapped his fat hands and laughed a little as the boy ran off in the direction that he indicated.

He watched until the lad was out of sight and then returned to his business with evident relief. He did not know how anxious Péron was to be at home or what a horror he had conceived of the pastry shop.

The child ran the whole distance and arrived so out of breath that Madame Michel marvelled and scolded while she counted the change. She found one more pie than had been paid for, which she however supposed to be intended as the messenger's perquisite, and so set her mind at rest. Her

conscience permitted an increase in the amount received more readily than a decrease in the returns from her livre. Being satisfied with the results of Péron's shopping, she did not pursue her inquiries and remained ignorant of the scene of which he had been the hero.

CHAPTER V

THE CHÂTEAU DE NANÇAY

IT was not until Péron was ten years old that he made a journey outside the gates of Paris. Jacques des Horloges was accustomed to go from one grand house to another, to regulate and mend the great clocks, for his skill was held in high esteem, and such errands frequently took him beyond the city limits. But he had never taken the boy with him until one day, as he was setting out, Péron begged so hard to be allowed to accompany him that he consented. The stout Norman horse which Jacques always rode stood saddled at the door, and the clockmaker had just finished packing his saddle-bags when the child ran out, eager and importunate for the privilege of a ride beyond the gates. Michel listened to the petitioner with some amusement and a good deal of doubt. He stood hesitating, his hand on the saddle and his eyes on the pleading face. He was wavering between a desire to gratify the boy and a doubt of the wisdom of yielding to persuasion; and while he was still undecided his wife came to the door.

"Péron wants to go," he said, smiling, "and I have the mind to take him, only" — he paused, still looking at the child — "I am going to Poissy and beyond."

"To Nançay?" madame said quickly, and she too looked at Péron.

"Ah, may I not go?" cried the boy, turning from one to the other. "I will be good, I will do just as I am bid!"

"Poor baby!" exclaimed the woman, "'t is a pity, and yet —"

"There can be no harm done, I think," Jacques remarked, after a moment, "and it is meet that the child should see something besides the shop and the Rue de la Ferronnerie. Give me what he may need for three days, and he shall go."

Péron uttered a cry of delight, and danced about on the doorstep, while Madame Michel hesitated yet a moment longer.

"Ought we to ask Père Antoine?" she said doubtfully.

Jacques des Horloges shook his head. "I have not time," he said, "and, after all, it is no great matter. So be quick, for I must be off."

Without more ado a little bundle for Péron was added, he was mounted behind the clockmaker, and they set out on their journey, the child as full of eagerness as though they were going out into a

new world. He looked about him proudly from his perch behind Jacques ; he felt that it was an important event in his life, and he was conscious of the envious glances of the children in the streets. But the sights of the city were familiar to him, and it was not until they had passed beyond the limits of Paris and were traversing the green meadows that he realized the delights of a ride in the open country. He was not a talkative child, and he took his pleasure silently, gazing about him with great interest and noting every unusual object. The river seemed so beautiful out here, running through the fields, that he could scarcely believe that it was the same Seine into which he had so often looked from the Pont Neuf. Those observant dark eyes saw every wild flower, every green leaf by the wayside, and followed eagerly the flight of the swallows overhead.

Jacques des Horloges was as little inclined to conversation as the child. The clockmaker's broad, sturdy figure sat squarely on the back of his stout horse, and he kept his eyes on the road, attending steadily to his own business. He was not a romantic person, and would have been much amazed at the child's fancies about the matter-of-fact objects in view. He was a plain man who saw only plain duties in life, and, for the most part, performed his share of them in a simple way.

This silent couple made the journey of five leagues to St. Germain-en-Laye without interruption and without incident, and riding into the town stopped for dinner at the Three Moons. The child, tired from the long ride, was glad to find a seat at the table in the public room, where they were forced to wait some time to be served, for it was crowded with guests. It was the season for the annual fair in the forest of St. Germain, and the inn was filled with traders, mummers, and merrymakers going there for business or entertainment. At a table near Michel's sat a company of strolling players, and the jests and the grimaces of the clown soon aroused Péron in spite of his weariness. The grotesquely painted face and the gay dress with its fringe of bells delighted the child and diverted his attention even from his food. There were soldiers here too; but he had cared less for them since the scene at Archambault's, although he could not yet entirely resist the fascination of their highly polished corselets and the rattle of swords and spurs. There were peddlers there with their packs, on the way to trade at the fair, musicians, countrymen, a motley gathering and a lively one, the ripple of talk and laughter, the clatter of dishes, the rush and hurry of attendance, all enlivening the scene. Yet there was grave enough

talk whispered in some of the corners of that very room. Where there was a knot of persons of the better class, the conversation ran on the quarrel of the queen mother and the king, on the defeat of her troops at Ponts de Cé and the possibilities of peace; of the influence of Albert de Luynes and the return of the Bishop of Luçon from exile at Avignon. Food enough for talk, but it was low spoken; there had been two courts and two factions too long for men to venture free speech. Marie de' Medici, the queen mother of France, who had ruled during the king's long minority, could not retire from a foremost place in the government. Jealous, spiteful, scheming, — a wily Italian, — she never rested from her endeavors to control her son and his affairs until she was defeated by the wit and determination of Richelieu; and for years France beheld the strange spectacle of two courts and two trains of courtiers, a mother and son at swords' points with each other. Behind all this was the ever-watchful jealousy of the two religious parties. The Huguenots, no longer protected by the great Henry, were suspicious of his son and fearful that their rights would be infringed. The Catholics, on the other hand, liberated from the strong rule of the dead king, and hoping much from Louis XIII., were as restless and eager for strife

as ever, and found themselves, in their turn, encroached upon by the Huguenots, who were unwilling to grant the freedom of religion to others which they demanded for themselves. So long the victims of intolerance, they were themselves intolerant. Already the great trouble was brewing that would culminate in the siege and fall of La Rochelle, the stronghold of the Protestants. During the regency of Marie de' Medici—a season of weakness between the time of Henri IV. and that of Richelieu—the grandees had grown restless again under the royal yoke. Since the days of François I. the power of the great nobles had been diminishing; they saw it with infinite discontent, and now gathered around the queen-mother, intriguing and plotting for a larger part in affairs, encouraged to hope much from the divisions in the state, and from the jealousy and reckless ambition of Monsieur, the king's brother. All these matters therefore furnished fruitful topics of conversation at every public house; and dangerous gossip it was.

Jacques des Horloges was too wise to join in such talk, but he met some friends and it was some time before he set out again upon his journey. The two—the clockmaker and the child—left the town and rode on to Poissy, passing through the midst of the fair before they

reached the gates of that place. The booths were set up in the edge of the forest under the shelter of the trees, and from branch to branch were swung ropes of flowers and evergreen, from which hung little bells that tinkled merrily with every breeze. The open grass plots were covered with dancers, arrayed in the gayest hues, like a moving bouquet of tulips, while the music was furnished by various groups of players, and was full of variety, from the loud blasts of the haut-boys to the guitars which were coming into common use, having been introduced at the French court from Italy. There were, too, the shrill sweet notes of the flûtes de saus, or reed flutes, which were coupled by pairs in the orchestras and played the minor keys, some soft and even sweet, especially in the open air, in spite of the crudeness of the instruments. The scene was not only gay, but it had a certain rural charm of its own, which was not even cheapened by the itinerant tradesmen who were crying their wares by the roadside. There was a large concourse of people, for the Fête de St. Louis never failed to bring a full attendance. There was a poultry show, too, and a horse show, each drawing a large audience, and a full selection of marvels to dazzle and bewilder the country people.

Jacques des Horloges, however, was not diverted

from his even course by sights which he had witnessed every year, and he rode along at a steady gait, until a strolling gypsy stopped his horse, offering to tell the clockmaker's fortune. Michel shook his head.

"Away with you," he said impatiently; "I have more serious work to do than to listen to your babble."

"Have a care, master," retorted the fortune-teller glibly; "'tis ill luck to scorn a friendly warning, there may be trouble ahead!"

"Pah!" ejaculated the clockmaker, urging on his stout horse, "the devil take your nonsense."

"'T is not the time for indifference," said the gypsy, holding up a long finger; "the king makes peace with the queen; changes come; yonder boy is not yours!"

Jacques des Horloges stirred uneasily in his saddle.

"Mère de Dieu!" he exclaimed softly, but he only urged his horse on, without looking back until he reached the gates of Poissy.

Here they put up at the first hostelry in the main street, and Jacques saw his horse safely stalled in the stable before he took his saddle-bags on his arm and set out with Péron to attend to the errand which had brought him so far. They passed through the streets out on to the road

which led along the bank of the Seine. To the left, the ground rose gradually until it reached a hilly elevation, fringed by a woodland. Some sheep were grazing on the slopes, and the afternoon sun cast long shadows in the hollows. Over the tree-tops showed the gray turrets and gabled roof of a large château. The clockmaker plodded along, leading the child by the hand, and neither spoke until a turn in the road brought them around the shoulder of the hill and in full view of the house. Then Péron uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise, and Jacques des Horloges stopped involuntarily and stood looking at the scene.

"Do you like it?" he said, turning to the child.

"It is beautiful," replied Péron; "is it the king's house?"

Jacques laughed. "Nay," he said, "did you think it like the Louvre? We are going here to fix the old jacquemart. This is the Château de Nançay."

Before them the ground rose in a succession of terraces to the elevation on which were the buildings. A stone wall ran along the face of the lowest terrace, with great iron gates, which stood open. Above this were three other terraces, faced by low parapets, in the Italian fashion, and beautifully grassed and planted with roses. The highest formed an immense quadrangle, in the center of

which stood the château and its out-buildings. It was of gray stone and of a graceful style of architecture, a mantle of ivy climbing over its turrets and arching the long row of windows which commanded the terraces. Behind it were the stables and the house of the steward of the estate. The whole place was in perfect order and beautifully situated on the spur of the hill, overlooking the river and sheltered by a small forest in the rear. On the central turret of the château was one of the old jacquemarts, and even at a distance two figures could be discerned, one on either side of the dial, which, on nearer inspection, proved to be two knights in complete armor, who struck the hours with their bronze maces on a great silver bell above the face of the clock. It was a very old clock, one of the first made in imitation of the famous jacquemart of Dijon, and this central turret of Nançay had borne for years the name of "Tour de l'Horloge."

To Péron, this house was more beautiful than the Louvre or the Palais des Tournelles in the old Marais, because of the open country about it. To the child, bred in Paris, the green field and waving trees, the slope of the hill-tops, the blooming flower garden, was a setting of perfect beauty. He followed the clockmaker up the successive steps of the terraces, too obedient to lag behind,

but gazing about in pleased wonder. He saw the great velvet faces of the pansies, the clustering roses, the more modest violets; he noticed everything that escaped the eye of Jacques des Horloges; and he followed, in the same silent mood, into the great house itself. They did not approach the stately main entrance, but were admitted by a porter at a side door. The clockmaker was expected, and being an old visitor was permitted to set about his work undisturbed. It was his business to wind and clean and lubricate the machinery of every clock in the château, from the jacquemart to the cook's timepiece, and there were many. Jacques was a man who performed all tasks expeditiously and quietly, and he commenced his rounds at once, only bidding Péron keep near him. He entertained no fear of the child getting into mischief; in that respect he was too unchild-like, and often perplexed the good clockmaker.

There was no occasion to fear that Péron would offend for lack of interest in what he saw; the boy was amazed and delighted at the beauty and richness of the château's interior. The floor of the great hall was tessellated, paved with Italian marble, and the balustrade of the main staircase was elaborately carved. While the clockmaker was busily engaged with the old timepiece in the hall, Péron went about softly, peeping in first at one door and

then at another, each in turn, giving him such a bewildering vista of beauty and luxury, that the child fancied himself in fairyland. No one seemed to be stirring in this part of the house; indeed the marquis was away from home, and the little explorer, meeting no one, grew bolder and ventured into the dining-room to look at the display of silver and gold on the immense carved sideboard. Here were not only dishes and goblets, but also fanciful vases and figures of the precious metals; there were also several beautiful examples of ceramic art, the work of Maître Bernard des Thuilleries and of his predecessor, Robbia; and the abace and crédence, nearer the table, were covered respectively with rare glass and plates and dishes. The room was very long, and at the end was a mirror in a gold frame of such curious design, — ropes of flowers tied with broad ribbons and held above and below the glass by golden cupids, — that Péron stood a long while examining it, not noticing his own figure reflected therein. A strange contrast he presented to his rich surroundings, the clockmaker's boy, in plain, dark clothes and coarse boots, but handsome and full of health, and large for his years.

Beyond the mirror was a door draped with pale blue hangings, and Péron, grown bold, lifted the silken curtains and stepped into a smaller room,

softly carpeted and richly furnished. But here he was destined to meet with a surprise. He had advanced quite a way before he became suddenly aware that he was not alone. At the other end of the apartment stood a child, a little girl, of about Péron's own age or less, and she was gazing at him in the most profound amazement. She had seen the intruder before he was aware of her presence, and was searching him with a glance that was not only full of astonishment but of disdain, as she observed every detail of his shabby appearance.

At the sight of her Péron halted too and stood returning her gaze, — but with very different feelings. To him she seemed the most beautiful child that he had ever seen. At the first glance he thought her a fairy. She was small and slight, with the fair, rosy loveliness of childhood, her great black eyes, fringed with long black lashes and set off with delicately pencilled black brows, while, in direct contrast, her hair was like spun gold and extremely fine and glossy. This little vision was arrayed in pure white, with ruffles of fine lace and little white silk shoes. It was not marvellous that the clockmaker's child should gaze in amazement at this small beauty who, in his eyes, rivalled the fairest belle of the Marais.

CHAPTER VI

A BUNCH OF VIOLETS

THE two children, thus suddenly confronted, stood regarding each other for some moments in silence. Then the little girl drew back with a gesture which was wonderfully full of hauteur for one so young.

"Who are you?" she demanded arrogantly. "Where did you come from, boy?"

"From Paris," returned Péron promptly; he was not shy of another child.

"From Paris?" she repeated, opening her eyes to their fullest extent; "what are you doing here, then?"

"Nothing," the boy answered truthfully, all the while thinking more of her wonderful appearance than of her imperious questions.

The little girl stood a moment longer as if uncertain what to do, and then she stepped backward toward the door behind her, all the while keeping her eyes fixed on the intruder.

"Mademoiselle!" she called loudly. "Mademoiselle Lucien!"

The portière was lifted hastily and a young woman came in answer to the summons. The little girl pointed her finger at Péron, who still stood there, embarrassed now by his situation but not knowing how to escape.

"Mademoiselle, look at that boy," cried the child, "he must be a thief!"

"I am not!" exclaimed Péron, amazed at the accusation and resenting it with all his honest heart.

"How did you come here, then?" asked the little girl, "and what are you doing?"

"Go away, boy!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Lucien haughtily, catching hold of the child by her side. "Come, Renée!" she added, "do not go near him; there has been fever in Poissy and his clothes may be full of it!"

"His jacket is very poor!" little Renée remarked mercilessly, "and his shoes are coarse — are you a beggar?" she added, addressing him.

"No," replied Péron, with passionate indignation, "I am not a beggar or a thief, any more than you are!"

"You are an impertinent child!" said Mademoiselle Lucien, drawing her little charge nearer to her; "if you do not go away I will call one of the men to put you out with a whipping!"

"That you shall not!" cried Péron, his face

scarlet with indignation; "no one ever whipped me — I would kill any one who did!" and he clenched his fists and faced them like a fury.

"Ciel!" exclaimed mademoiselle, "he is a little savage; come away, Renée!"

But her charge was not inclined to go. She was a spoiled child and not accustomed to obeying her governess. She found Péron more interesting than the humble village children whom she was accustomed to order about at her will.

"I will not go, mademoiselle," she said wilfully; "I want to know why he has come here in his poor jacket and his coarse boots!"

Péron was not given to conversation, but he was a child who had listened and thought, and the shyness which had sealed his lips at Archambault's did not possess him to-day. He forgot it, for he was burning with indignation at the manner in which this little demoiselle treated him.

"You are ill-mannered to speak of my boots," he said gravely. "Père Antoine says that a beggar may be the same as the king, in heaven."

Mademoiselle Lucien laughed. "What have we here?" she exclaimed; "is this an infant preacher?"

Péron only looked at her, not understanding either her laughter or her words. But the little girl understood the boy better than the woman;

her curiosity being excited, she was eager to pursue her inquiries.

"Who is Père Antoine?" she demanded.

"A good man," replied Péron promptly, "who would tell you that you were naughty to call me a thief!"

At this juncture Jacques des Horloges appeared suddenly at the door. He had missed the boy and was overwhelmed with amazement to find him angrily confronting the little girl and her governess. The latter recognized the clockmaker at once, and began to understand the child's appearance in the château. She listened to Michel's profuse apologies with contemptuous indifference.

"It does not matter as long as M. le Marquis is absent," she said, with a shrug; "but pray, Maître Jacques, keep the boy from running over the house; we do not allow the village children even in the kitchen for fear of some contagion for Mademoiselle Renée. You will take him away from these rooms at once."

The clockmaker obeyed without a word, but once out of hearing he muttered loudly to himself, and to Péron's surprise administered no rebuke. Instead of scolding the child for his intrusion, Jacques seemed to resent intensely Mademoiselle Lucjen's arrogant orders.

"The saucy hussy!" he ejaculated; "and in this house, too! Mademoiselle Renée will take some infection, will she? Pah! 't is the boy who needs the care."

Grumbling to himself and holding Péron tightly by the hand, the honest man gathered up some of his tools in the hall and, still leading the child, proceeded through a small door to the staircase which ascended on one side of the Tour de l'Horloge. This was the main tower of the château and was very strongly built of stone; in the older days, before the use of artillery, it would have been capable of a lengthy resistance. The stairs which led to the Jacquemart were constructed after the fashion of the early turret stairs, being of stone and winding around the tower, between the outer and inner walls, and so narrow that one resolute man could have held the enemy at bay upon the step. They were lighted high up by narrow, lance-shaped loopholes in the wall and were festooned above with cobwebs; for this spot was seldom visited except when the great clock was wound.

Jacques Michel climbed up slowly, followed by little Péron, for the stairs were too narrow for the two to walk abreast. Half way up they came to a door which opened into the house; here the clockmaker paused, and laying down his tools on

the step fumbled in his pockets for a key, which he presently produced and unlocked the door. It opened with some difficulty on its rusty hinges, and he entered the room beyond, pushing the child before him. It was a large apartment, evidently long unused. Three large windows looked out over the terraces and the sloping fields beyond to the Seine. The ceiling was of carved oak, the floor paved with enamelled tiles, the great carved bedstead, inlaid with ivory, stood partially screened by the Arras tapestry of the clotet. The benches in the window recesses and the arm-chairs were all beautifully carved, and in one corner of the room was an alcove furnished with a crucifix and prie-Dieu.

Jacques des Horloges stood looking about him with an expression as reverent as if he stood in a chapel. Péron had long ago learned the futility of asking him questions, and he remained silent, only observing everything with a child's keenness of vision. The quiet and the air of desertion about the place oppressed the boy, but he did not speak. Finally the clockmaker seemed to recollect him and gently pushed him toward the alcove of the crucifix.

"Go say your prayers there, Péron," he said abruptly; "we ought to pray here."

"Why?" asked the child. "Is this a church? It does not look like one."

"Nay," replied Jacques, crossing himself, "but a good lady died here who is now, I doubt not, an angel in Paradise."

"Was she a saint?" inquired Péron, in an awed tone, for Père Antoine had trained him well.

"Ay, as near one as a woman may be," said the clockmaker bluntly. "I know no better, nor will you ever see her equal. Say your prayer, child, and look well at the room, for we must go on, but I would have you see this place; and here, I think, M. de Nançay comes not — nor the others."

When the prayer was said, Jacques took the child to the window and pointed out at the garden.

"You see yonder the terrace by the fountain," he said, "I will take you down to a door which opens from this tower, and you must go there and wait for me. I can see you from above as I work, and will come to you presently. It is a dizzy place up by the clock and I would not take you."

With this instruction, he took Péron back the way they had come, first locking up the room and putting the key in his breast. At the foot of the stairs they found a door which let the boy out into the garden, and he ran off along the terrace,

happy to breathe the free air again and see the flowers; for the strange apartment and the command to tell his beads for the sake of a dead woman had shaken his sensitive nerves, and he was not recovered from his treatment at the hands of little Mademoiselle de Nançay. Péron resented it with all the strength of his proud heart, and so angry was he that the unusual conduct of Jacques in the locked room was of less consequence. He did not find time to wonder at it, — he could only think of the insulting tone and words of the little girl, especially interesting to him because she was so near his own age. He neither understood nor appreciated class distinctions; the child Renée had been educated in arrogance beyond her years, and recognized differences in birth and station; Péron, on the other hand, had only the teachings of Père Antoine, who had sought to instil into the boy's mind the humility of the Christian, seeing plainly enough the pride which filled the childish heart and was likely to work mischief enough without any prompting.

Péron walked along the terraces now to the fountain indicated by Jacques, and here he stopped, standing with his back to the château and looking at the flowers, the velvety grass, the birds picking on the slopes. The splash of the

fountain made pleasant music in his ears, and he was just beginning to feel at his ease when a slight sound above made him look up at the terrace behind. There, leaning on the parapet and watching him curiously, was his little tormentor. Renée was alone, having eluded the vigilance of her governess, and her arms were resting on the stone balustrade while she leaned over so much that her chin rested on them and her golden curls hung over her face, shading it and framing it, while her great dark eyes were fixed on the boy. It was a charming picture, since both children were beautiful in their different ways and both possessed marked characteristics. At the sight of her, Péron's anger returned with full force, and he turned his back on her, his fists clenched and his face growing very red. She was not a boy, and he could not chastise her as he had once unmercifully beaten a youngster who ventured to stone M. de Turenne.

There is nothing more effective in reducing arrogance than silent contempt. Péron's manifest scorn had an immediate effect on the little spoiled beauty of the château. She had been accustomed to adulation, servility, humility; honest anger was new and interesting. She was not troubled with any grown-up reserve, and there was, too, a secret relenting. She was not an ill-

natured child, only a spoiled one, and under all lurked a tender heart. She could not forget her unkind criticism of the stranger's poor clothes; she had reasoned it all out and come to a conclusion. He was the clockmaker's son and doubtless he was poor. Renée had a vague idea of poverty, but she knew that it was a state which deserved commiseration; her old nurse had taught her not to despise it, but Mademoiselle Lucien's subsequent teachings had not been wise; and Renée had no mother. Her rudeness to the clockmaker's boy troubled her, and she was as quick to act on a good impulse as on a bad one. Péron's squarely turned back did not disturb her, for she felt herself a great lady and able to bestow her favors where she chose. Yet she was rather at loss what to say and how to begin; above all, she saw a party of horsemen coming up the road, and knew that her father would very soon cut short her adventure. She received no encouragement from the boy, however, and when she spoke at last it was in a rather uncertain voice.

"I am sorry," she said softly.

No answer from Péron.

"I did not mean to speak of your boots," she ventured again.

Still no reply.

"I am sorry," said Renée once more, "and I think you are mean to be so cross!"

Péron gave her a sidelong glance but refrained from speech, and there was a prolonged silence. Then, just as the horsemen were dismounting at the lowest terrace, he felt something brush his cheek and a bunch of violets fell at his feet. He looked up then and saw Renée running away, laughing, her golden curls waving in the breeze and her white garments fluttering. When he was sure she could not see him, Péron stooped down and picked up the violets; he was very fond of flowers, and none bloomed in the Rue de la Ferronnerie. He was still holding the nosegay when the party of cavaliers came sauntering up the terraces, so near him that he could hear their talk. A gay party they were, dressed in the richest fashion of the court and led by the tall and fine figure of M. de Nançay, the same who had seen Péron at Archambault's. They all wore high, loose-topped boots and full lace-ruffled breeches, with jackets of gay colors and short cloaks of velvet thrown back on the shoulders and displaying equally rich linings, while their hats were well trimmed with plumes. They were lightly armed, only one or two wearing hallicrêts and carrying pistols; they could scarcely have ridden from a greater distance than Paris. As

they approached Péron, he caught sentences which he heard without comprehending their significance.

"'T is dull now that the queen-mother has no court at Blois," one of the party remarked, "but there may yet be two at Paris. I hear, too, that the Bishop of Luçon wants the cardinal's hat."

"He will not get it," said M. de Nançay sharply. "The devil take the Bishop of Luçon. Albert de Luynes will never see a cardinal's hat on the head of Jean Armand du Plessis."

"Yet 't is said that the queen-mother desires it," suggested another follower mildly, "and you, M. de Nançay, are too stanch to recede, even after the defeat at Ponts-de-Cé."

Nançay struck his sheathed sword across his boot.

"The queen-mother is duped," he said; "the bishop is a fox who will rob her sheep-fold. A fig for a woman's wit, when she is flattered by so skilful a priest!"

"It may be you are mistaken, M. le Marquis," replied the first speaker, "Madame la Mère reads well the wit of the bishop. I have often thought that he would yet defeat M. de Luynes, and if he gets the ear of the king —"

The marquis frowned darkly, giving the courtier a black look.

"You choose a strange subject for croaking, monsieur," he said, in a biting tone, "especially here!"

His companions all stared at the luckless disputant, who grew crimson and stammered an apology which, fortunately for him, was lost, for at that moment M. de Nançay's eye alighted on Péron. Jacques des Horloges had observed the party approaching, and hurrying down from the château, with his tools, was just preparing to leave the place with his little charge, when the marquis discovered the boy. The sight of the child seemed to disconcert the nobleman more than the speech of his friend, and a sharp change came over his face. He turned to an attendant who was following at a respectful distance.

"Who are those people — the man and the boy?" he asked sharply.

"Jacques des Horloges, the famous clockmaker of St. Honoré, M. le Marquis," replied the man; "the child, I think, is his — I have seen him in his shop."

For a moment the marquis hesitated, as if undecided whether to recall the clockmaker or not, and his followers stood about him, secretly amazed that he should notice such humble persons. But M. de Nançay did not heed them, he continued to watch Michel and Péron until both

had passed out of the gates and taken the road to Poissy. When they were out of sight he led the way to the château; but there was a frown on his face, and his temper was more acrid than usual on such occasions; for he had the reputation of being a genial and hospitable host.

CHAPTER VII

PÉRON AND PÈRE ANTOINE

THE Rue de Bethisi was the artery which connected the older quarter of the Hôtel de Ville and the Palais Tournelles with the more modern neighborhood of the Louvre. In the vicinity of the Church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, the Rue de Bethisi divided the Rue de l'Arbre Sec from the Rue des Fossés St. Germain l'Auxerrois, the spot fortified by the Normans during their siege of Paris, and the scene of the murder of Coligny. Near this corner, on the north side of the Rue de Bethisi, and not far from the Hôtel Montbazon, was the lodging of Père Antoine, though it was some distance from his parish of St. Nicholas des Champs. The house was tall and narrow, with an oriel window in the second story, which commanded a view of three streets. Houses are not mere masses of stones or bricks and mortar: they have expressions, eyes, mouths, ears; one might almost fancy — souls. They are the shells of those who inhabit them, and many speak, in plain language,

their own histories. Is there anything more sad than the house of death? more desolate than the forsaken home? This house on the Rue de Bethisi had an expression of serious benevolence. The room which Père Antoine occupied, where little Péron came daily for his lessons, was a large one on the second floor, and well lighted by the oriel window. There were no indications of wealth in the furnishings; the polished floor was scantily covered with two threadbare rugs, there were two carved arm-chairs, — one in which the priest always sat, the other turned to the wall and never used. Besides these there were two or three stiff-backed chairs, a table, a crucifix, a small but beautiful painting of the Annunciation, and a little clock, fashioned after those of the Valois period, a gift of Jacques des Horloges; for portable clocks were still a luxury for the rich, and the priest would as soon have dreamed of buying one as of possessing a cardinal's hat. This was all, except the books, and those were Père Antoine's greatest worldly treasures; they were arranged with loving care on the shelves on either side of the room. Many of them were of great value, gifts from the wealthier patrons who had learned to appreciate him or owed him a debt for consolation that could never be repaid. Some of these gifts were splendid specimens of the

bookbinder's art, and rich in clasps of gold and silver. It was told of Père Antoine that one of the princes of the blood had sent him a worldly book bound with great magnificence and set with jewels, and the good priest had returned it with the quotation of St. Jerome's words: "Your books are covered with precious stones, and Christ died naked before the gate of His temple!"

To this room came daily little Péron, the clock-maker's adopted child, to learn his lessons out of Père Antoine's primer, and to spend a laborious hour copying from the Gospels, that he might learn his Bible and his penmanship at the same time. It was a pretty sight to see the rosy-faced, dark-eyed boy sitting by the pale, studious priest and taking his lesson soberly. Péron was a good scholar, and willing enough except on occasions when the shouts of children at play made his ears tingle and his heart throb; but he had never been allowed to join in those rough sports, so he bore the ordeal with patience, and only sighed more heavily at the task. He loved his teacher, as many other people loved Père Antoine, and he had a quick mind. The surroundings, too, were an incentive; he longed to be able to read all those books, those beautiful books which he was allowed to look at and to handle with a care that had been instilled by constant teaching and ex-

ample. By the time he was ten years old he could read both French and Latin fairly well, and by spelling out the longer words could gather the meaning of most of the books which he especially loved to look at. These were the older volumes, with gayly decorated borders, some of great beauty and a few having miniatures *en camaïeu* or *en grisaille* after the fashion of the time of Charles VI. There was one, the "Heures de la Croix," which was curiously bound in white silk with sacred emblems upon it, and encased in a red "chemise," a kind of pocket in which books were kept, and which was made of silk, velvet, or sandal-wood, as occasion might require. Naturally, the books which attracted the boy were those most gorgeously bound or emblazoned with pictures of saints and martyrs, such as the "Livre d'Heures," "Les Miracles de Notre Dame," the illuminated antiphonaries and missals. He had even tried to spell out the "Commentaries of St. Jerome" and "Boèce on Consolation," this last because it was bound in green "Dampmas cloth" and very beautifully embroidered. He was familiar, too, with every printer's and bookseller's mark, and these were then curious enough, from the two leopards of Simon Vostre to the six-oared galley of Galliot de Pré, bookseller of Paris in 1531, nearly a hun-

dred years before Cardinal de Richelieu. But it was these old books, whose capital letters had been decorated by the illuminator in many colors, which pleased Péron, and not any of the more modern volumes. Solid and somewhat dreary books for a child to spell a lesson from, but none the less helpful in the struggle; and so faithful was the pupil that there was seldom a day that Père Antoine did not send him away with some word of commendation. And praise from the priest meant more than the wondering admiration of Madame Michel, who regarded the boy as a marvel of erudition for his years; and so he was, for a child of his condition in the world. So ready was he to learn, and so prone to meditation, that Jacques des Horloges occasionally grumbled out a fear that he might be made a better priest than a soldier, for strangely enough the clockmaker never seemed to entertain a thought of training Péron as an apprentice at his own trade.

It was the child's custom to talk more to the priest than to any one else. In the shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie he confined his confidential communications to M. de Turenne, but on the Rue de Bethisi he found his tongue, and many times Père Antoine turned his face aside to hide a smile, too wise to wound the boy's

feelings. This was the secret of his power, for a child both dreads and hates ridicule. It was therefore to the priest that he carried the doubts and the curiosity awakened by his visit to the Château de Nançay. Père Antoine knew nothing of the journey to Poissy, and was unprepared for the sudden questions which his pupil propounded. The boy had been reading laboriously from "Les Petites Heures," guided by his teacher's pencil, when he stopped and turned his large eyes upon him.

"Père Antoine," he said slowly, "who died in the room next the tower at the great château near Poissy?"

The priest leaned back in his chair, an expression of intense astonishment crossing his face, instantly followed by one of sorrow so sharp that the pupils of his eyes contracted as if with pain.

"Who told you of Poissy?" he asked quietly.

"I have been there," Péron declared with an air of conscious pride; "Maître Jacques took me on horseback. We rode a long way and saw the fair in the forest."

"The fête at St. Germain-en-Laye?" said Père Antoine. "Did you like the green fields and the flowers, Péron?"

The child looked down; he was thinking of the bunch of violets which he had brought home sur-

reptitiously and hidden in his cupboard; he was ashamed to keep anything that had been thrown at him as if he were a beggar or a vagrant.

"I should like to live always in the green fields," he said; "they are so much prettier than the stone walls of the Rue de la Ferronnerie."

Père Antoine sighed, laying his hand softly on the bent head with one of his rare caresses.

"Poor child," he murmured sadly; "our paths are not always easy, the stones cut our feet; but fret not for a different condition of life; discontent is a cankerworm which eats the heart. The streets of Paris are narrow and dingy, yet you may learn here to walk the narrow way of life eternal. You grow to be a big boy, Péron; presently, instead of spelling with me, you will begin to learn the lessons of existence. Some of us can have green fields and flowers, but many, my child, have only the flint-paved way, and are shut in by walls as grim as those of the Châtelet. See to it that you crave not that which is another's; verily, there is no more cruel sin than envy."

"Why do the rich say rude things to the poor?" asked the boy sharply.

A slow flush crept up to Père Antoine's temples and his sensitive lips tightened.

"It is the way of the world, Péron," he said softly, "not God's way."

"It is a very mean way!" the child declared promptly; "I will never stand it."

The priest looked at him in surprise; for some time he had been conscious of the development of a new characteristic in his pupil, but he was not prepared for the fire of the boy's resentment. He shook his head gravely.

"You must not harbor thoughts of malice, Péron," he said; "I have labored to teach you the lessons of Christian humility."

"I do not see why some people are so rich and others so poor," Péron remarked, unmoved.

"You are not very poor," Père Antoine replied soothingly, "you have a comfortable shelter, and the care of good Maître Jacques and his wife."

He was endeavoring to quiet the child, but his words only called forth another question.

"Are my father and mother really dead?" Péron asked, leaning his elbows on the table and gazing earnestly at his teacher.

Again the older face clouded and the kind eyes dwelt sadly on the rosy countenance of his interrogator.

"Both dead, Péron," he answered softly. "Your mother when you were a baby, your father when you were three years old."

"Did you know my mother, Père Antoine?" the child asked, a longing in his tone which may

have caused the spasm of pain that passed over the priest.

"I knew her all her life," he answered, "and I was with her when her spirit passed into Paradise; she was a very noble, gentle, Christian woman."

He bent his head as he spoke and crossed himself, seeming for an instant to forget the child.

"Do I look like her?" the boy asked, with eager interest.

"You have her eyes, my child," Père Antoine said tenderly, "but you grow daily more and more like your father."

"Of what did he die?" Péron inquired; his mind seemed fully roused at last, and he was not inclined to spare.

The priest's pale face grew even more grave than it had been; he laid his hand on the neglected book before his pupil.

"He died suddenly," he said; "but come, child, you neglect your lesson."

But he was not to evade the persistent little questioner.

"What was my father's name, what is mine?" he asked; "other boys have always two names — or three, sometimes even four — but I am only Péron."

The priest spoke severely now. "My child,"

he replied, "you have no name but Péron now, nor can I tell you your father's name; neither can Maître Jacques. Be content, my boy, to bear the name we have given you and to do your duty, since you may not know more than we can tell you. See here rather this sentence which you left half read."

Péron followed his guiding pencil for a few moments, and then he looked up again, fixing his eyes on his instructor.

"You have not told me who died in the room at the château at Poissy," he said.

The priest passed his hand over his eyes; he was thinking prayerfully, although the boy did not know it. A long, sad vista opened before Père Antoine's mental vision; the questions of love, duty, necessity, beset him. He was a wise man as well as a good one, but sometimes a child may confound a sage. He loved Péron too, with the tenderness of a woman, and he felt that with him lay the chief responsibility, since he was the most intelligent as well as the most deeply concerned of his guardians. After an instant's pause, a pause so slight that the eager interrogator scarcely noted it, the priest answered him in his usual calm tone.

"The Marquise de Nançay died there, Péron," he said gravely. "A very good woman."

This answer did not satisfy the boy.

"Maître Jacques said she was like a saint," he remarked curiously.

Père Antoine drew a deep breath, his luminous eyes looking over Péron's head into space.

"We cannot judge," he said, in a low voice, "but I have never known a better woman."

"Was she as good as my mother?" asked the child bluntly.

"She was as good as your mother," replied the priest slowly.

"Maître Jacques made me say my prayers there," remarked Péron gravely.

The sad shadow in Père Antoine's blue eyes cleared, as sometimes the clouds break in the eastern sky and let the sun shine through.

"It is well," he said, and there was a reverent pause.

But this was not the end of it.

"Is that her little girl who lives at Nançay?" was the next question.

Père Antoine started, and the sensitive flush came again.

"No!" he replied sharply.

"Is that tall man, who wears such wonderful lace ruffles, her husband?" pursued Péron, unmercifully.

"A thousand times, no!" cried Père Antoine.

"Then," exclaimed Péron in triumph, "how can she have been the Marquise de Nançay? I heard them call him the marquis."

Père Antoine wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and rose and opened the casement.

"It is warm," he said, then he turned to the child with the manner which his pupil knew how to interpret. "We have wasted much valuable time," he remarked gravely. "I wish you to learn from the Psalter to-day. You should not ask so many questions; there may always be several people of the same name. It is more important for you to read well than to know so much of unprofitable matters. I notice that when the letters are colored in blue, you more easily mistake them than those in red; this is not as it should be, and shows either a want of application or inattention to your lessons."

For the next hour and a half Péron found Père Antoine a harder taskmaster than he had ever been before, and many times, in the interval, the child sighed as he thought of the green fields and flowers between Paris and St. Germain-en-Laye.

CHAPTER VIII

PÉRON'S FIRST VICTORY

WHEN the boy was twelve years old, a great change came into his life. The Prince de Condé, coming into the shop one day, saw him, noticed his strength and beauty, and offered to receive him into his household to be trained to the profession of arms. This opportunity was joyfully embraced by Jacques des Horloges, who had long been in despair of placing the child as he desired. Père Antoine had trained him well in reading, and he was a fair scribe, but he had had no one to teach him to wield a weapon or ride a horse, and the clockmaker desired to see him a soldier rather than a priest.

Condé's offer was therefore the subject of many debates in the room behind the shop; Jacques Michel being eager to send him into the household of a prince of the blood, and Père Antoine and Madame Michel half inclined to put obstacles in the way, mainly because they could not endure the thought of parting with the boy. But the opportunity was too brilliant to be lost, and in the end the clockmaker prevailed.

So it was that madame washed and pinned out the best lace collar and brushed the black taffety suit with many secret tears, and the day came at last for Péron to leave, for a while at least, the humble shelter of the shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève and go with his adopted father to his great patron. The boy was too proud to weep, but he covertly kissed M. de Turenne and wiped his eyes surreptitiously behind the jacquemart before he left the familiar quarters to begin a new life. His heart swelled with pride, however, at the thought of being trained for a soldier, and he walked as if he already felt a sword at his side.

The change from a shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie to the house of a prince was marvelous enough, but it was not all. Péron had attracted the attention and fancy of Condé, and was an acknowledged favorite in the household. He was handsome, straight-limbed, and large for his age; and he was not only trained for the camp, but also for three or four years he served as a page to the princess. It was a happy and uneventful period in his life, and he improved in person and manners. He received his first lessons in sword play from Choin, an expert fencing-master employed by Condé to train his men, and Péron was an especial favorite with the maître

d'armes. He was an apt pupil, his lithe, active figure seemed made for sword practice, and he had a wrist like steel. He was destined to serve as a musketeer, but he was thoroughly trained in all military exercises, and became a fine horseman before he was sixteen. He not only enjoyed the advantages of a soldier's education in the great establishment, but he became accustomed to the manners and fashions of the court circle. In the Hôtel de Condé he could see all the great personages of the day, from the king and Monsieur to Richelieu; for the Bishop of Luçon was now a cardinal. It had been his privilege also to attend upon the princess when she stood in her grand salon to receive her guests, and to follow her when she went to the Hôtel Rambouillet, where Catherine de Vivonne received all the wits of the day, and where, at a later period, the Cid was read to the chosen few of madame's coterie.

But it was not Péron's fate to remain long with Condé; another change was to come into his life, and, like the first, it came suddenly and unsolicited. It was the custom of Choin, the fencing-master, to train the boys and young men of the household in the tennis court at hours when it was unvisited by the prince or his guests. One afternoon they were assembled there as usual, the maître d'armes and his pupils, some dozen lads about Péron's age,

in various employments in the establishment, and all given the advantages of military exercises, then so essential to every young man. Choin was a merciless tutor: a blow was apt to follow a rebuke or accompany it, and he showed no favor. The lads were taught to use both pistol and sword, and many of them were already expert. It was, however, a high compliment to receive a challenge from Choin to single combat, and but few of the boys could defend themselves at all against the fencer. He was a short, thick man, with a neck like a bull's, and much the same kind of wide nostrils. His small bright eyes glittered like the points of stilettos, and his shock of black hair hung in a straight bang across his low forehead. He was half an Italian, he was one of the most expert swordsmen in Europe, and he bore no love to Richelieu since the edict which had struck such a blow at duelling. He was in no very amiable mood when he called his pupils together, and more than one lad had received a box on the ear before the first hour was over. It was his way, when out of temper, to challenge one of the boys and vent his rage by inflicting a humiliating defeat on the unfortunate. It happened that he selected Péron, perhaps because the lad had shown a daring indifference to his teacher's mood and yet had, so far, escaped a blow. Choin did not

know the lion that was sleeping in the boy's heart; he had made a favorite of the clockmaker's son, and had never before tested his skill in any of his fits of passion. The two engaged now, to the intense interest of the others. Both were stripped of coat and waistcoat, and Péron's lithe, slender figure presented a strange contrast to the bulky form of the *maître d'armes*. The spectators, a group of half-grown lads and hostlers, drew back in a circle large enough for the encounter, and challenger and challenged faced each other. Choin was not only in a bad temper, but also contemptuous of his adversary's skill; he forgot how intelligent and apt a pupil he faced. Péron watched him with heaving breast; he looked for defeat, but was determined that he would not be disarmed at the first stroke, as the others always were. He was, of course, no match for the fencer in strength, but he had the activity of a cat and he was not angry; moreover, he was sharply conscious of the gaping interest of the onlookers, in the expectation of his failure. The foils were blunt, happily for him, and there was no cause to fear the uncontrollable fury of the *maître d'armes*. There was a momentary pause; then, at the signal, their swords crossed, and Choin made the pass which always disarmed the boys, though they had seen it a thousand times. But Péron was not

to be taken unawares; he sprang aside and parried to the amazement of his instructor. There was another short play, and again the *maitre d'armes* failed to win and was even annoyed by his adversary's skill. Then the sparks flew; Choin began to put out his full powers, and yet, miraculously, as it seemed to him, his youthful opponent held his ground. The perspiration began to stand out on the broad forehead of the fencing-master, and his short neck grew red across the nape. He was furious, and his anger made his strokes a trifle less dexterous than usual, while the boy, who had expected defeat, was so elated by his successful resistance that he redoubled his efforts. A grin, first of amazement and then of delight, began to broaden on the faces of the spectators. Two or three slapped their comrades with boisterous mirth, and there was a growing desire to applaud. Choin felt it, and he glared around him fiercely.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" he cried, "if you asses do not hold your tongues, I'll whip every one of you, and spit you besides!"

This threat had the effect of slightly suppressing the enjoyment of the spectators, but they could not refrain from their delighted interest as another round commenced and still Péron kept his weapon. So intent were they upon their

amusement that no one noticed the quiet approach of a small party of cavaliers, who halted at the sight of the fencers and stood observing the scene. Choin was now fairly enraged, and he was keeping his antagonist hotly engaged, the two dancing around the circle; for as the maître d'armes thrust, Péron dodged and leaped from side to side, parrying or avoiding every blow. Suddenly one of the hostlers looked up and saw the group on the terrace; instantly there was a murmur which reached the ears even of the fencing-master. "The cardinal," they cried, "and M. le Prince!" Choin started and looked up, and in that instant Péron struck his foil from his hand and sent it flying over the heads of the spectators.

"Bien!" cried the Prince de Condé, clapping his hands, "good hit! good hit!"

Péron glanced up in amazement, and saw Condé and Cardinal de Richelieu with several others looking down at them. The boy's face turned scarlet. A storm of applause burst forth at the prince's approving words, and the victor found himself a hero, while the maître d'armes stood discomfited, fully aware that he had not only been defeated, but had displayed too vicious a temper before his patron. Condé enjoyed the whole situation.

"You are fairly whipped, Choin," he said, laughing; "you are too excellent a teacher."

"I ask your excellency's pardon," stammered the fencing-master; "I shall not make the same error twice."

"By St. Denis! 'tis no error to instruct so well," retorted the prince; "at this rate, I shall have to engage your pupils to teach you."

"Who is the lad?" suddenly asked the cardinal. He had been a silent spectator of the scene, his keen face showing no sign of his thoughts.

"A protégé of mine, the son of a clockmaker," replied 'Condé, not without some pride in his selection.

"Of Jacques des Horloges," said Richelieu, deliberately. "What is the boy's name?"

The prince called to the victor, who had retired among his comrades.

"Come hither, Péron," he said, "and salute Monsignor."

His face still suffused with blushes, his curls disordered, and with an air of deep embarrassment, Péron advanced. The summons overwhelmed him with confusion; the shy, proud boy had always shrunk from the presence of this august personage, and he was awkward and agitated now that he felt those piercing black eyes upon him. It was not the trembling obsequiousness of the sycophant, but the shrinking of pride, and the cardinal read him like an open page.

"This is Péron, monsignor," said Condé, as the lad made his obeisance.

"Péron?" repeated Richelieu, thoughtfully. "What is the last name?" he added, addressing the boy abruptly, as he looked searchingly at the blushing and ingenuous face.

"I have no other," replied Péron, with a simple dignity of manner, rousing himself from his embarrassment.

"Ah!" ejaculated the cardinal, his eyes still fixed on the boy, "you are then only the adopted son of the clockmaker of the Rue de la Ferronnerie?"

"That is all, monsignor," was the reply.

"You do not know who were your parents?" continued Richelieu, while Condé listened surprised at his interest.

"If I knew my father, monsignor," Péron said, "I should bear his name."

"A trite answer," remarked the cardinal. "Be not over-ambitious, my son; serve the Prince de Condé and strike your good blows for France, not in private brawls or secret conspiracy — and France will reward you."

With these words he turned away and proceeded along the terrace, accompanied by Condé and followed by an escort of gentlemen.

"I became interested in the boy at the clock-

maker's shop," Condé said, by way of explanation ; "he has, as he says, no name but Péron."

The cardinal made no immediate reply. He walked on deliberately; the resolute, inscrutable face showed no sign of his secret thoughts. At last, however, he spoke, a slight, sarcastic smile on his lips.

"Péron," he said; "nay, rather Jehan François."

"Your pardon, my lord cardinal," replied Condé, "I do not think I heard you aright."

The cardinal smiled again. "M. de Condé," he said deliberately, "give me the boy."

Condé looked at him in surprise.

"Is it possible that you also see the charm of the lad's face and manner, monsignor?" he asked in an amused tone; "he is but a clockmaker's boy, yet he interested me."

"And he also interests me," said Richelieu, calmly. "Frankly, M. le Prince, may I have the boy?"

Condé shrugged his shoulders.

"Certainly, your eminence," he said pleasantly; "he is not so precious to me that I cannot part with him. His guardians, Jacques des Horloges and a priest, Père Antoine, made much ado about his coming to me, but doubtless they will be proud to give him to you."

"That is soon settled," Richelieu answered;

"With M. de Condé's permission, therefore, M. de Condé, I will take the lad with me to Ruel."

So it was that, to Péron's surprise and dismay, he found himself riding that night to Ruel in the train of the man who had fascinated his childish fancy, and whose figure had moved in every vision of his boyhood. He could not decide whether he was pleased or not, but it was a change which excited his fancy and flattered his youthful pride. Not many boys of his years had had the good fortune to attract the interest of Richelieu. It seemed to impress even Jacques des Horloges and Père Antoine as a stroke of luck, for they made no objection to the sudden change; it may have been that they dared not. In any case, all went smoothly, and the fatherless boy took his place in the cardinal's house, watched, though he knew it not, by that keen eye which could not be deceived.

CHAPTER IX

THE CARDINAL'S CLOCK

TIME passed, and there were changes in the state and at court. The trouble between the Huguenots and the Catholics had reached a climax, and France had once more beheld a religious war. The gallant Duke of Rohan had made his fight and lost. The famous siege of La Rochelle was now a thing of the past; vanishing in the distance as the white sails of Buckingham's fleet vanished from before the starving city and left it to the mercy of the cardinal. Richelieu had triumphed in war and peace, though still beset by constant plotting and counterplotting at home. The queen-mother, who had at first supported and patronized him, had become jealous of his increasing influence with the king, and was now intriguing to overthrow the minister. She was seconded in her efforts by her second son, the Duke of Orleans, who, led on by his mother, had openly rebelled against his brother the king, and invoked the aid of Spain. His defeat at Castelnaudary had ruined the gallant Montmorency, and

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Monsieur was ever ready to desert those whom he had involved in his own dishonor. Marie de' Medici had been defeated at every point in her struggle with Richelieu, and finding herself in danger of being shut up by the cardinal at Moulins and stripped of the last vestige of authority, she fled at night, attended by only one gentleman, and took refuge in Brussels. There she continued to hatch innumerable conspiracies, determined to overthrow Richelieu and regain her own place in the councils of her son. The struggle between mother and son which Henri Quatre had predicted, was only to terminate with her death. Unhappily she lived long enough to keep affairs in a constant turmoil during most of her son's reign, and at her death there was still left the Duke of Orleans, who inherited her temperament. However, it was during the early years of the queen-mother's exile at Brussels that the greatest number of plots were constantly springing up under the feet of Richelieu, and it was at this time that he made the most use of his followers and tried the merits of all those in his service.

Thus it happened that the years made many and swift changes for Péron, while they made but few at the shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie. The boy had grown to be a tall young man in the cardinal's household, and wore now the dress of

Richelieu's musketeers, having served his patron faithfully and on several occasions with distinguished courage and skill. He stood high in the cardinal's esteem, and there seemed no reason to regret his change from the service of Condé.

As for Jacques des Horloges, he showed little sign of increased age; the clockmaker's hair was gray now, and there were lines on his brow, but he bore himself with the same appearance of muscular strength, and Madame Michel did not look a day older. Her broad brown face was as smooth as ever, and her glossy black hair was still put back under a large white cap. M. de Turenne was dead, but a lineal descendant still sat in the corner by the great jacquemart.

Since Péron entered the household of Richelieu, there had been much recourse to the shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève, and when the Palais Cardinal was built it was Michel who furnished the clocks. It was from the Rue de la Ferronnerie that the cardinal obtained the huge clock which stood in one of the smaller salons of the palace; and a famous clock it was, made for Catharine de' Medici and especially framed to serve the secret purposes of the Italian queen. The dial was of silver, inlaid with gold, and it was surmounted by a silver angel with a trumpet which sounded the hours. The case of the clock was so tall and so

broad that a man could stand within it without interfering with the working of the machinery. It was of polished wood inlaid with brass, and there was a small aperture in the door, which could be closed or not, at will, by a slide, so cunningly contrived that it seemed but part of the pattern of brass-work which ornamented the clock, — a strange clock, which had served a double purpose, telling the time and concealing spies, both in the Louvre and the Hôtel de la Reine. It had a strange history: it struck the hour for the bell of St. Germain l'Auxerrois to toll the signal for the Massacre of St. Bartholomew; it counted the minutes before the murder of Henri de Guise, and it was throbbing out the measure of time when Henri Quatre was dying. Through Jacques des Horloges it came to stand at last in an apartment of the Palais Cardinal; not in the salon where Richelieu held his court, not in the anterooms crowded with the eager clients of the great minister, but in a long, narrow room overlooking the Rue des Bons Enfants, which was reached by a gallery leading to the entrance of the eastern wing; a room where the cardinal received persons of all conditions who came to him, voluntarily or involuntarily, on secret missions. Here the sting of many a traitor was drawn, the key of many a plot was disclosed, the secrets of the queen-mother were drawn

skilfully from her agents. The room was hung with crimson velvet; the chair of the cardinal stood facing the clock of Catharine de' Medici, and his visitor either stood or sat directly in front of the clock. Only one door to the apartment was visible, and that opened into the gallery; there was another, but it was hidden by the hangings, and it closed the way to the private rooms of Father Joseph la Tremblaye.

It was in this room that Péron stood, waiting the orders of the cardinal. He had been summoned there at an early hour to wait until Richelieu gave him some personal instructions. He had been employed on many missions by his great patron, and he did not regard the occasion as unusual. He stood looking up at the clock, for it recalled many recollections of his childhood on the Rue de la Ferronnerie. He had been a handsome boy and he was a handsome man, with a strong, lithe figure and a face of unusually regular beauty. His glossy hair was parted in the middle and fell in curls to his shoulders, after the fashion of the day. He wore the rich uniform of the cardinal's musketeers, a wide collar of heavy lace around his throat and ruffles of lace at his wrists. Many thoughts of his humble and lonely childhood, of his training under Condé's patronage, of his sudden transfer to the household of Richelieu, were passing

through the young soldier's mind. He remembered how the figure of the Bishop of Luçon had fascinated his childish mind ; he remembered the beauty of the Princesse de Condé, and the face of Leonora Galigai, the wife of the hapless Maréchal d'Ancre.

He was walking up and down the room when the hangings were put aside, and Richelieu entered alone. His musketeer saluted and came to an attitude of attention not far from his chair. Time had wrought changes in the ruler of France. The pale Italian face had lost none of its keenness, its inscrutable calm ; his moustache and chin tuft were still black, but the years had touched his hair with white. He wore his red robe with a cape of priceless lace, and a small red cap on his head ; and he moved slowly to his seat. He did not speak for some time after he sat down, but folded and endorsed some papers on the table at his side ; then he put them away, and looked up at the young man who stood waiting his pleasure. His first question, though asked in cold and deliberate tones, startled Péron.

"Are you fully armed?" he asked.

"I have my dagger and a pistol, as your eminence can see," Péron replied, laying his hand on his weapons.

"It is well," said the cardinal, and he glanced

at the clock; "in an hour I shall have a visitor, and I shall receive him alone, — alone, mark you, though I know him to be a violent and dangerous man. There will be no guards in the gallery nor on the stairs; but you see the clock, and doubtless you know its secret. It is my wish that you conceal yourself in that clock; from where it stands you can see every motion of my hand: if I raise it thus to my chin, seize and disarm the visitor; if, however, he makes a sudden attack upon me, before I have time to signal, you know your duty."

"I know it, monsignor," Péron said quietly, casting a strange glance of interest at the great clock.

Richelieu saw it, and for a few moments his stern dark eyes studied the young musketeer, and then a slight smile flickered on his inscrutable face.

"You have been with me now many years," he remarked, speaking slowly; "I remember that you told me you had no name but Péron."

"I know of no other, monsignor," Péron replied, his face flushing.

The cardinal looked out through the window toward the Rue des Bons Enfants.

"More than twenty years ago," he said in a cold tone, "a gentleman of France was beheaded for complicity in a treasonable plot against the state, against the king. He was convicted and sentenced

through the testimony of his best friend; his estates, being confiscated, went to the accuser. His guilt, however, was never fully established, and more than ten years ago I found evidence which proved him innocent. The man — the friend — who bore witness against him would have removed his only child so that no claimant to the estate could ever be produced; would have done away with the child, a boy of four years old, if he had not been baffled by the fidelity of a servant and a priest. They spirited away the boy, and bred him up in concealment, under a false name, in a shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie."

"Mère de Dieu!" cried the young musketeer, below his breath, "is it possible that your eminence speaks of me?"

Richelieu looked at his startled face and smiled, — a strange expression in those wonderful eyes.

"I have told your history, Péron," he remarked coolly. "I recognized you in the tennis court of Condé by your likeness to your father."

"And my father died that death innocent?" cried Péron, forgetting the presence in which he stood, forgetting all but this wonderful revelation.

"He died innocent," replied Richelieu, "and doubtless M. de Bruneau died without cause also. He was the nephew of your father; he made a claim to the estates; the king was inclined to lis-

ten, but there was again a charge of treason, ~~this~~ time, however, with some sort of drunken confession. M. de Bruneau went to the Châtelet, and from thence to the block, and the man who had ruined both uncle and nephew still possessed the estates and the title."

"I remember," said Péron, thoughtfully, "hearing Père Antoine speak of M. de Bruneau. Monsignor, what is my name?"

The cardinal smiled. He had watched with interest the storm of emotion which showed itself in the pale face of the soldier.

"Your name is Jehan François de Calvisson," he replied, "and but for the strange vicissitudes of destiny, you would be to-day Marquis de Nançay."

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Péron, with passion, "and that man, whom I have seen and passed a dozen times, is my father's murderer!"

"Your father's accuser," corrected the cardinal, quietly. "His name is Pilâtre de Marcou, Sieur de Briçonnet, but he bears your father's title and holds his estates at the pleasure of the king."

Péron took two short turns across the room, his breast heaving and his lips compressed. Richelieu watched him narrowly; doubtless his purpose would be accomplished.

"I beg your pardon, monsignor," Péron said,

pausing before him, "but a man can scarcely hear such a tale with composure."

The cardinal glanced at the clock.

"In a quarter of an hour now," he said, "M. de Nancay comes here to see me on a secret summons. You will take your place, therefore, in the clock, and remember your instructions."

The fire leaped up in Péron's eyes, and he laid his hand on his dagger.

"Pardieu!" he cried, "I pray your eminence to make the signal!"

Richelieu looked toward the door; his quick ear had caught the sound of a footstep in the gallery.

"M. le Marquis is early," he said coldly; and then he pointed to the clock, his face as immovable as stone. "Take your position yonder, Sieur de Calvisson, and do your duty."

Without a word Péron turned with a white face, and stepped into his strange place of concealment. As he did so, the clock struck eleven, and the silver angel sounded the silver trumpet, a sweet clear note, more penetrating than a bell.

CHAPTER X

IN THE TOILS

ON the stroke of the clock the door at the further end of the room was opened and M. de Nançay entered unattended. As he advanced, his tall figure loomed conspicuously in the narrow room. Time had dealt kindly with him; he was now past middle age, but rather more handsome than in his earlier manhood. As usual, he was dressed in the extreme of fashion. He wore a suit of violet-colored velvet, his collar was of Mechlin lace, as were the ruffles at his sleeves and his knees, and he wore jewelled buckles on his low velvet shoes. A scarf of pale blue silk, the color of Nançay, crossed his breast; he carried his hat, covered with long plumes, in his hand, and wore no weapon but his sword. He approached the cardinal with a truculent bearing, and scarcely saluted as he paused before him.

"You are punctual, M. de Nançay," Richelieu remarked, affecting not to notice his manner. "Be seated, sir," he added, indicating the chair in front

of the clock; "there are matters which we shall need to discuss at leisure."

After an instant of hesitation the marquis sat down, leaning his elbow on the table, and gazing boldly and defiantly at the minister, whose cold face was like a mask, without expression save for the dangerous glow in the black eyes.

"I am pressed for time, M. le Cardinal," de Nançay said haughtily. "I came hither at your request and to my own detriment, for I should be on my way to Blois."

Richelieu held a sheet of folded paper in his hands, which he was drawing back and forth through his fingers.

"Ah, to Blois!" he said, raising his eyebrows slightly, "M. de Nançay mistakes his destination. To Brussels, was it not?"

The marquis frowned fiercely.

"Sir," he said insolently, "'t is possible that you know my plans better than I know them myself."

The cardinal inclined his head. "It may be so, M. le Marquis," he replied, coolly unfolding the paper which he had held in his hand, and spreading it out before his visitor; "you will be so kind as to read over that list and see if I have omitted the name of a single conspirator against the life of Armand Jean du Plessis."

At the first sight of the paper the dark face of the marquis turned pale; but he controlled himself with wonderful nerve and stared contemptuously at his opponent.

"Sir," he said coldly, "if you desire to head the list of your enemies with the name of a prince of the blood, it is not for me to confirm or contradict your suspicions."

"M. de Nançay, you play boldly and well," Richelieu said, "but you have lost. You have not been unwatched, monsieur, since the day of Castelnau-dary. You were followed at Compiègne, your correspondence with Monsieur and with the Comte de Soissons is in yonder cabinet. Your intrigues in Lorraine and with M. d'Épernon are known, as was the plot that you would have hatched in Languedoc. You are in my power, M. le Marquis; it remains with you to obtain my best terms."

There was not a change in the inscrutable face, but his inexorable black eyes never left those of his victim; his gaze was fixed unwaveringly on the man who sat listening to him, and who was controlling his rising passion with a mighty effort which sent the blood from cheek and lip. M. de Nançay saw that he was caught in a skilfully laid trap, but he was a man of too bold a spirit and too fierce a nature to waver even in the face of his deadly peril. His hand sought the hilt of his

sword and played with it, as though he longed to draw the blade and strike it into the bosom of his tormentor.

"M. le Cardinal," he said haughtily, "you have made strange statements, but I defy you to produce the proof."

Richelieu smiled for the first time. He leaned forward a little in his chair, and pointed in the direction of the garden, which was one of the beauties of the Palais Cardinal.

"M. le Marquis remembers perhaps the conversation which he held with M. de Vesson under the lime-tree yonder?"

M. de Nançay wetted his parched lips with his tongue, and the beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"It is the first time I have known of hearsay testimony, monsignor," he remarked with a sneer.

"It is sometimes more valuable than false witness, M. de Nançay," retorted the cardinal, dryly.

"Is this all that you have against me, M. le Cardinal?" demanded the marquis, with a black look, — "the trumped up and unfounded charges of your spies, the diseased imaginations of your cooks and lackeys?"

"Bear with me, M. le Marquis," Richelieu replied calmly, "there is yet something more. I know of your designs against the state and against

my life; I know of the proposed meeting at Poissy—in short, monsieur, I know all, from one of your number.”

The marquis drew a deep breath and leaned forward in his chair; he saw that the play was played out.

“Give me the name of the man who dares to accuse Pilâtre de Nançay behind his back,” he demanded fiercely.

The cardinal looked at him with a sardonic smile.

“It is easy to gratify you, M. de Nançay,” he said; “I had the greater part of my information through Gaston d’Orléans.”

Nançay sprang from his chair, cursing Monsieur in a burst of fury.

“The accursed coward!” he exclaimed, “the liar who betrayed Montmorency and a hundred more. May his soul perish in hell!”

The cardinal watched him keenly. Once he had almost raised his hand to his chin, but he let it fall again, to the profound disappointment of the watcher in the clock.

“Be seated, M. de Nançay,” he said quietly; “it is not my custom to offer terms to traitors, but I have spoken of terms to you.”

“You are pleased to call your enemies traitors, monsignor,” the marquis remarked bitterly, “yet you are not the king.”

"I have no enemies but those of the state, monsieur," Richelieu replied coolly. "I have sufficient evidence to send you to the Châtelet — ay, to the block, but it is possible that your life may be spared under certain conditions."

For a moment there was a pause, and no sound but the throbbing of Catharine de' Medici's clock, though it seemed to Péron that the noise of his own heart-beats drowned that of the machinery over his head. Nançay was again sitting in his chair, leaning forward, his eyes on the floor. Opposite was Richelieu, as immovable as a statue and as cold and remorseless.

"Name your conditions," said the marquis, at last, in a hoarse voice.

"They are simple," replied the cardinal, deliberately; "there are three: First, you will make a full confession in the presence of witnesses; second, you will affirm the names upon that list, excepting Monsieur's, who will make his terms with the king; third, you will sign this paper which establishes the innocence of François de Calvinsson, late Marquis de Nançay, whose execution was due mainly to your accusations. On these terms the king will spare your life."

M. de Nançay laughed harshly.

"Being a ruined man, I should doubtless be harmless, M. le Cardinal," he said scornfully.

"You offer terms which no one but a madman would accept."

The cardinal leaned back in his chair.

"You know the alternative, monsieur," he retorted indifferently; "I have but to raise my finger and you will be arrested."

"Shall I?" cried de Nançay passionately, springing to his feet and drawing his sword. "Not until I have my revenge, monsignor!"

He sprang toward the cardinal, overturning the table in his impetuosity, and his weapon was at Richelieu's breast when Péron caught his arm with an iron grasp. The sudden apparition of the young musketeer took de Nançay completely by surprise, and as he turned to shake him off, he looked full into Péron's face.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, falling back, his own face turning the color of ashes, and his gaze fascinated by this image of his dead victim. It seemed — for one wild moment — that François de Calvisson had returned, in the full flush of youth, to keep his reckoning. He stared wildly at Péron, his breath coming short.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried again, "do the dead haunt me?"

"Ay, M. le Marquis," said Richelieu, in his smoothest tones, "they live ever in the consciences of those who have compassed their ruin."

The marquis rallied at the sound of the voice he hated, and the truth flashed upon him.

"So," he said bitterly, "'t was for this that you hatched this scheme to entrap me."

In his first astonishment, Péron had snatched his sword from his hand, but Nançay was now a desperate man, and he made a sudden dash forward, trying to evade the young soldier and reach the door. But it was in vain. Péron closed with him on the instant, and, not having drawn his own weapons, clenched with him in a deadly embrace. The musketeer had the advantage of greater agility and more coolness, and he pressed his antagonist steadily back toward the window.

Richelieu had risen from his chair at the attack of M. de Nançay and he now stood by it, watching the struggle with composure and making no attempt to summon any one to Péron's aid, although for a while the victory seemed in doubt. However, assistance was not needed, for the soldier succeeded in tripping the marquis and threw him at full length on the floor. He fell heavily and lay unconscious, his rich dress in disorder and his rigid face distorted with passion.

"Have you killed him?" demanded the cardinal, a suppressed eagerness in his tone.

Péron was kneeling on one knee beside the

unconscious man, flushed and short of breath from the struggle.

"Nay, monsignor," he said, "'t is but a swoon."

"I thought you would use your weapons," said Richelieu, slowly.

Péron raised his head proudly.

"I never strike a man in the back, your eminence," he said.

"It is the more likely that you will be struck there," retorted Richelieu, dryly; "summon aid and have this carrion removed to a place of security; then I have other orders for you."

In a few moments M. de Nançay's unconscious form was raised and carried out of the room, and Péron again stood alone before Richelieu. The cardinal had seated himself calmly and was arranging the papers thrown out of place when the table was overturned.

"Sieur de Calvinsson," he said, addressing Péron by his new name, "I have put a dozen men at your disposal; take them and go at once to the Hôtel de Nançay on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre. Search the house, secure all the papers, and arrest any suspect within it, leaving a sufficient guard to prevent any person, man or woman, from entering or quitting it. Do all this quickly and return to report to me."

Péron bowed and retired. The cardinal fol-

lowed him with his eyes until the door closed behind him, then he leaned back in his chair and looked at the clock.

"The fool!" he exclaimed, "the young fool! A dagger thrust would have ended all. I mistook the boy's nature; Michon or Jacques would have made no such mistake."

CHAPTER XI

RENÉE

PÉRON and his twelve men, all armed and prepared for possible resistance, left the Palais Cardinal in less than a quarter of an hour after Richelieu had given his final instructions. Péron was in command of the party and walked a little in advance, anxious to be left to his own meditations, for the last three hours had been full of emotion; in that short space his life had been entirely changed. He was no longer a nameless waif, the adopted son of a clockmaker; he bore a name long honored in France, and his family had sprung from the noblest origin. On his mother's side he was related to the great Huguenot house of Rosny, and on his father's to the Catholic Duke of Montbazon. From being a man of humble origin, whose only chance of preferment lay in the favor of his patron, he was now a claimant to title and estates lawfully his own. The incidents of his childhood, so perplexing to him, were at last all understood. He remembered the room at the Château de Nançay,

where Jacques des Horloges had made him pray; he remembered Père Antoine's puzzling answers to his childish questions; it was all plain now, the mystery of the attic on the Rue de la Ferronnerie, the tenderness and respect with which he had been treated by the clockmaker and his wife, and a hundred other trifling indications of his rank which had been concealed from him. He was not slow to divine the motive of this concealment; nothing could have been gained by the revelation of such a secret, and it was a dangerous one too, while his father's enemy was in such a powerful position that he could easily have removed the child. Péron's feelings toward M. de Nançay were colored with passionate resentment and a thirst for revenge. Had he been less generous, he would have slain him in the struggle before the cardinal's clock, but it was not in his nature to strike a blow when an enemy was at his mercy. A man less scrupulous of honor would not have hesitated to avenge his father's death. Nor would Péron have hesitated to kill the marquis in an open fight, where both were equally armed. Had M. de Nançay been free at that moment and the edict against duelling not in force, Péron would have challenged him to single combat on the Place Royale and fought him to the death. But Richelieu was cardinal, and the duel was a

capital offence. Yet, as Péron walked through the streets, he felt that when the hour came and they met on equal terms, he would surely kill M. de Nançay; and with this passionate feeling in his heart, he approached the house of his enemy.

It was now the middle of the afternoon, and the party of musketeers walking rapidly through the streets attracted more or less attention; women peeped at them from the upper windows, tradesmen stared from the doors of their shops, and a small train of ragamuffins had gathered in their wake. The brilliant uniform of the cardinal's guards and the striking figure of their leader caused a little ripple of excitement. The sudden swoop of Monsignor upon his enemies was proverbial, and the sight of his soldiers always created interest, conjecture, sometimes even alarm. They had reached the corner of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, however, before anything occurred to delay their rapid progress. Here there were many foot-passengers; a party had just left the Hôtel de Rambouillet, another was going toward it, and through these groups of gay gentlemen the musketeers were obliged to push their way. Péron, considerably in advance of his companions and with his mind full of his own thoughts, advanced quickly into the midst of the crowd. But his course was barred by a young man dressed

in the extreme of fashion, with his face painted and his hair curled like a doll. He was standing directly in Péron's way, and as the musketeer approached, faced about and eyed him insolently from head to foot. The glance was unbearable, and Péron with a quick movement thrust him aside and would have passed on, contemptuous of the fop, who seemed little more than a boy. But this was not so easily accomplished. The young man instantly resented the strong push of the soldier's arm and sprang after him, catching up with him and peering into his face.

"Sir musketeer, you struck me!" he exclaimed, frowning fiercely.

"Sir courtier, you blocked the public way," retorted Péron, with impatient contempt and a scornful laugh.

"Ah!" ejaculated the stranger, savagely, "you make a jest of it. Sir, if you had hurt me, I would have thrown you into the street."

"And had you hurt me," retorted Péron, calmly, "I would have broken your neck."

The exquisite stared as if unable to believe his own ears.

"Impertinent!" he said between his teeth, "you are a musketeer, I am the *Sieur de Vesson*! If we were equals, I would teach you to insult gentlemen."

"I am Péron the musketeer," replied Péron, coolly. "Were you a man I would beat you; but since you are a fool, sir, I will simply teach you to give place to your betters;" and with that he caught the courtier by the arm and made him spin around so suddenly that when he was released he fell in a little heap into the crowd which had closed up about the two. A glance at the faces which surrounded him, some curious, some amused, some angry, warned Péron that he might be disastrously delayed. Across the street was the Hôtel de Nançay, and in one of the windows he saw a woman's face. A warning, at any instant, might defeat the cardinal's plans. Péron drew his sword and glanced over his shoulder at his followers, who were laughing heartily at the Sieur de Vesson's discomfiture.

"Close up," shouted the young commander, "and advance in the king's name."

"Not so fast!" cried a man, who seemed to be a servant. "You have assaulted the nephew of M. de Nançay. Gentlemen, I beseech you, aid me in apprehending this insolent soldier."

"Stand aside," said Péron, harshly; "think twice before you offer an affront to Cardinal de Richelieu!"

Monsignor's name had a magical effect. The crowd parted, and Péron led the way across

the street toward the Hôtel de Nançay. But the musketeers were not free of their followers. The Sieur de Vesson was recovering from his fall, and his indignant exclamations urged on his friends to resent the treatment that he had received. There were angry mutterings against the soldiers, and those of the better sort, even, were annoyed at the affront to a gentleman. Péron, meanwhile, keenly regretted the unhappy episode, as it had drawn general attention to his movements and made it impossible to keep secret the intended raid on the house of the marquis. The crowd was at their heels as the musketeers came to the entrance of the hotel. It was a large and imposing building, the main part being square and three stories high. It was flanked by two wings, however, of only two stories, which abutted on the garden in the rear. There was a flight of steps, four or five, up to the main entrance, which was arched and bore the arms of Nançay over the apex. The windows on the street, in the first story, were ironed, but those above were open. On the left side a lane ran down between this house and the next, and it was on this that the garden gate was situated.

Péron took in, at a glance, the possibilities for the escape of the inmates, and saw that he must divide his little party. It would take eight men

to guard the points of possible egress; only four would be available to assist him in the search of the interior and to resist possible interference. The crowd grew noisy, and no time could be lost; he gave his orders rapidly but distinctly, and then ascended the steps to the door, all the while conscious that a pair of eyes watched him through the opening of the shutter overhead. He tried the latch, but finding it fastened, he struck the door with the hilt of his sword. He was on the topmost step, a conspicuous figure, and below him were the four men he had selected to accompany him; behind these, the bystanders and M. de Vesson's friends had formed in a semicircle, held in check by curiosity and amazement, but ready enough for mischief. To Péron's surprise, after a short delay, his summons brought the porter to the door. The fellow opened it and peered out with a frightened face. He had not intended to admit his visitors unquestioned, but he was not prepared for the result of his movement. Péron's one wish and aim was to get into the house and secure it against the crowd while he executed the cardinal's orders, and no sooner was the door open than he thrust his foot and shoulder into the space and threw the door back with such force that he upset the lackey, who had been holding it. The musketeers were quick to follow up this

advantage, and in a moment all five stood within the hall.

"Close the door and bolt it," ordered Péron; then stirring the frightened porter with his foot, he added, "Up, knave; you will get no harm if you attempt no mischief. Tell us how many men are in the house."

The man had recognized the cardinal's uniform, and being greatly alarmed at the unusual violence of the entrance, fancied that something evil had happened, and, like all such creatures, was eager enough to propitiate. He stumbled to his feet and stood rubbing his joints stupidly and staring at the soldiers.

"There are no men in the house, your excellency," he said, "but the cook and the scullion. The others went out with M. de Nançay early this morning and have not returned. There are only women here."

This was better than Péron had had reason to expect, and he was inclined to believe it, because of the ease with which he had obtained entrance. He ordered the porter to stay where he was with one of the men, who was to watch the door, and leaving the two to warm their hands over the charcoal-pan which the porter had been feeding, Péron despatched the other three by different directions to the kitchen to secure the cook and close the

rear doors. This left the task of searching the house chiefly for his own portion, and after a hasty examination of the lower rooms, which were empty and evidently for more public use than those above, Péron turned to the main staircase. By this time the female inmates of the house had taken alarm, and more than one frightened face peeped at him from the gallery around the upper hall and commanding the stairs. These were broad and had two landings, for the ceilings were lofty and the flight was long. As Péron ascended, he heard a woman's voice raised in a tone of angry excitement. The hall was dim, although it was still early in the afternoon, but the sudden opening of a door cast a broad stream of light across the space at the top. The musketeer had reached the third step from the last when he was confronted by a young woman, who checked his advance with an imperious gesture.

"What is your errand here, sir?" she demanded disdainfully, "and how dare you thrust yourself into M. de Nançay's house with such violence?"

At her first appearance Péron had saluted her with grave courtesy, and he stood now, hat in hand, looking at her in surprise and amusement, for she looked ready in her defiance to fight a regiment of musketeers.

"Mademoiselle," he replied gently, "I come here with the king's warrant to secure certain papers. I can assure you that you will receive every consideration at our hands."

"You have made a strange mistake!" she exclaimed haughtily. "This is the hotel of the Marquis de Nançay; the king would send no one here on such an errand."

"I regret that I have not made a mistake, mademoiselle," Péron said, "but I can show you his majesty's warrant."

She looked at it and caught her breath. A horrible suspicion was taking possession of her; for a moment or two she was silent, evidently trying to collect her thoughts. Péron had come there with the bitterest feelings toward M. de Nançay and his family, but, divining who this young girl was, he looked at her with pity and admiration. She was not tall, and her small but graceful figure was richly attired in pale blue; her face was charming and would have been gentle and tender in its style of beauty but for the straight dark brows and glowing dark eyes. She had the white and red complexion of a blonde, however, and her face was framed in a profusion of pale golden hair which rippled in curls on her low brow, and fell, shading her cheeks, to her shoulders; part of it was knotted loosely at the

back of her head, but the greater part of the rebellious curls had escaped and were playing riotously about her neck. The sight of the king's warrant baffled her for a moment only; she rallied and glanced contemptuously at the bearer.

"Where is his majesty's provost-marshal?" she asked sharply.

"This was committed to me, mademoiselle," Péron replied.

"A grave mistake, sir," she said with a forced laugh; "you cannot compel M. de Nançay's household to respect a warrant in the hands of a nobody!"

Péron flushed scarlet and bit his lip. He had no wish to bandy words with this young beauty, knowing he would be worsted without the means of avenging himself, but he saw that it would be necessary to carry matters with a high hand, and he heard too the increasing tumult in the street. M. de Vesson was thirsting for revenge; no time could be lost.

"Mademoiselle," he said sternly, "I come here by the order of the cardinal, and I must do my duty, though I would gladly do it with all respect to your feelings and your rights, if you will permit me."

She gazed at him furiously, her head thrown

back and her hands toying nervously with a small dagger in her belt.

"Sir musketeer," she said, "I will resist to the last!"

Péron smiled involuntarily. Her small figure seemed to him no more than a feather in his way, but his chivalry was a mountain, and she was quick to divine it, though his smile made her furious.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle," he replied quietly. "My orders are to search this house, and I shall execute them."

"If you dare to do so," she retorted passionately, "M. de Nançay will have you sent to the Châtelet! Ay, sir, do you think we will endure such insolence? Hark! there is an uproar at the door; 't is time that some one came to protect women from such intrusion."

Péron heard the noise too, but he knew that it was only M. de Vesson trying to gain admittance. Mademoiselle meanwhile stood like a young fury, blocking the stairs. He determined to take strong measures.

"André," he called to the guard at the door, "shoot the first man who forces an entrance!"

Though he affected not to be looking at mademoiselle, he saw her face blanch. She expected her father, not knowing where he was. Péron turned to her with composure.

"Mademoiselle de Nançay," he said, "if further resistance is offered to the execution of his Majesty's warrant, and the delay precipitates a quarrel between my men and your father's, the first man who enters this house will be shot, without respect of persons."

She drew a deep breath and looked at him with furious eyes.

"Sir," she said scornfully, "you are no better than a house-breaker; but go your way — search the house, and much good may it do you and those who sent you!"

As she spoke, she turned and walked straight into a room at the head of the stairs. Not knowing what else to do, and anxious to keep her in sight, Péron followed. It was a large salon furnished with luxurious magnificence, the tessellated floor covered with rugs of Flemish carpet and the walls hung with tapestries of fine cloth of gold from the famous workers of the Hôtel de la Maque. There were several inlaid cabinets in the room, and to these Péron directed his attention, finding them fairly well filled with papers and books. Mademoiselle meanwhile had taken her position near the hearth, where a fire was burning, and she was watching him with a glance of angry disdain. He had searched two cabinets with small results, the documents being all of an innocent nature, and he

had just gone to the third, which took him to the end of the room, farthest from her, when he heard a slight noise and the apartment was suddenly illumined by the blaze in the chimney. He turned quickly and saw Mademoiselle de Nançay holding some papers on the logs with the tongs.

Péron sprang across the room, and taking the young girl lightly around the waist set her aside as he would have lifted a child. Then he thrust his hand into the flames; but it was too late: the charred and blackened remnant bore no likeness to a manuscript and crumbled to ashes in his fingers. Bitterly disappointed and mortified, he rose to his feet and looked around at his quick-witted adversary. He was astonished at the change in the haughty demoiselle; she was laughing and clapping her hands with the wicked glee of a child who has won a victory. He stood looking at her with a flushed face; it was not anger that he felt: a sudden recollection had brought back to him the flower-decked terraces and the laughing, beautiful face of little Renée de Nançay.

At that moment he was not thinking of the cardinal or his own wrongs; he only wondered if that bunch of faded violets still lay in the cupboard on the Rue de la Ferronnerie.

Misunderstanding his pause and his confused silence, mademoiselle swept him a mocking curtsey.

"Monsieur will continue his arduous labors," she said triumphantly, "without my assistance;" and she ran lightly from the room and left Péron standing by the hearth, entirely routed.

CHAPTER XII

MADAME MICHEL'S STORY

HALF an hour later, Péron had completed his fruitless search. He had expected no results from it, after mademoiselle's manœuver, but had faithfully executed his orders. She, meanwhile, had retreated to the garden, where she sat under a lime-tree, her cloak muffled about her, and refusing to budge until the intruders left the house. From the other inmates Péron met with no opposition, neither was there any further assault upon the door. It was indeed so quiet outside that he was at a loss to understand it, and supposed that the Sieur de Vesson had determined to wait for him in the street. But this was not the case; in the midst of the tumult, when de Vesson and his friends were boisterously demanding admittance, a messenger arrived on horseback. This man called the others aside, and after a hurried and excited conference they all withdrew, leaving the musketeers in undisputed possession of the premises. The crowd, drawn by the disturbance, then speedily diminished until only a handful

remained staring at the guards, who were posted at every entrance of the hôtel.

When the search was completed, Péron descended into the garden and bowed gravely before mademoiselle, who only gazed at him defiantly over the folds of her mantle.

"My orders are precise, Mademoiselle de Nançay," he said, "and I am forced to post my men around the house; but I shall leave none within it, that your privacy may be uninterrupted."

"Your consideration is appreciated, monsieur," she replied, in a mocking tone; "as long as I cannot leave my cage, I may do what I please within it! But alas! I am sorry for your varlets when M. de Nançay returns."

Péron made no reply; he thought instead of the marquis in the hands of Richelieu. He turned to leave the garden, but she was not yet done with him.

"Did you look under the beds, monsieur?" she asked lightly, "and up the kitchen chimney? Your occupation is noble, and you should neglect none of the details!"

"Mademoiselle," Péron replied gravely, "I got to the chimney too late."

She understood him, and a gleam of mischief leaped into her dark eyes; but she bit her lip and was silent. She would not jest with her inferior.

He turned again toward the gate, but something

in her last speech stung him; he faced about once more.

"Mademoiselle," he said haughtily, "when I came here, I did not know that there were any women in the house. I was ordered to seize the papers in the name of the king; I obeyed, but my duty has been odious to me."

She made no reply to this, but evidently it softened her mood, for she stood a moment looking at him and then took a step forward.

"Sir musketeer, I would ask you one question," she said. "Where is my father?"

Péron was silent. He, who had come here full of hatred of M. de Nançay, could not bear to strike this blow. She saw it, and, for the first time, wavered in her defiance.

"I pray you speak," she said hurriedly; "'t is better to know the worst than to be deceived with false hopes."

"He is in the Palais Cardinal," Péron replied.

She was agitated now, but uncertain. She gave Péron a searching glance.

"Does he stay of his free will?" she demanded imperiously.

"Mademoiselle," he replied gently, "I regret to tell you the truth; M. de Nançay is a prisoner."

"Mère de Dieu!" she cried softly, her face white to the lips.

But her emotion was only momentary. She drew herself up haughtily.

"I thank you for the truth, monsieur," she said coldly, and turning her back on Péron, she walked slowly into the house.

A strange transformation had taken place in his feelings since he entered the front door, and he went out of the garden now with a grave face. He even forgot that it was his own house that he was leaving, but he remembered to give the guards specific instructions about their duties in watching the place and about courtesy in their treatment of the inmates. He was surprised but gratified to find so few people in the street, and after making some inquiries about M. de Vesson's sudden departure, he took two of the men who had been in the house with him, and proceeded directly to the Palais Cardinal. In the absence of Richelieu, he made his report to Father Joseph, and was ordered to wait on the cardinal that night for further instructions. The interval of a few hours gave him the much desired opportunity to visit the shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève. His heart swelled with gratitude at the thought of the fidelity of the clockmaker and his wife, who had sheltered him at their own peril and reared the orphaned and penniless boy at their own expense, and that too without prospect of remuneration. As Péron pro-

ceeded from the palace to the shop by the way of the Rue de l'Arbre Sec and St. Honoré, where his childish feet had so often travelled, his thoughts were full of tenderness for the guardians of his infancy and a new emotion which he could not yet define in regard to his new position and prospects. He was not ignorant of the cardinal's intentions, and knew that he might shortly be proclaimed Marquis de Nançay; yet his thoughts dwelt more on the sting of mademoiselle's defiance as she stood under the lime-tree in the garden on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre. He thought more of her pain and mortification at her father's disgrace than he did of the wrongs which he had to revenge.

When he reached the shop he saw that there were several visitors conversing with the clock-maker, so he turned to the gate at the side, and finding it unlatched, entered the courtyard. He saw Madame Michel setting the table for supper, unconscious of his presence, and he quietly ascended the stone steps on the outside of the house and entered the workshop in the second story. Two apprentices were putting away the day's work and setting the place in order, and they scarcely noticed him as he passed through the room to his own little apartment, which remained exactly as it had been arranged for him as a child. It was full

of recollections for Péron, but he did not pause to consider them. He went directly to the little cupboard, which Madame Michel had left just as he had kept it. He opened it, and in a moment found a package tied up with the elaborate care of childish fingers. He undid it carefully, and there lay the piece of red glass which he had hidden so long ago, and with it, in a folded paper, were the dried and faded violets of Poissy. He smiled a little at the sight of them; a strange destiny had again brought him face to face with Renée de Nançay. The other relic he now examined by the light of a taper and saw that the red glass of his childhood was a ruby, of unusual size, bearing the arms of Nançay upon it. He needed no other confirmation of the cardinal's story; all through the day it had seemed possible that Richelieu was mistaken in his identity, but now he was convinced. He took the jewel in his hand and went down to the kitchen where madame was alone, her sleeves rolled up and her broad brown face rosy from the fire. She looked up at his entrance and greeted him with surprise and pleasure.

"I did not look for you, Péron," she said, "but you are always welcome. How goes it at the Palais Cardinal, and how is Monsignor?"

Péron did not reply to this question; he held out his hand with the jewel lying on the palm.

"Madame," he said, "I think you know the history of this."

She looked at it in amazement, and uttered an exclamation, her face flushing.

"Where did you find it?" she cried. "For years I have searched for that stone!"

Péron laughed. "Ah, good Madame Michel!" he said, "if you had told me the truth you would have found my father's jewel sooner."

She looked at him in joyful surprise; this secret had been her torment for more than twenty years. She clasped her hands, tears shining in her eyes.

"How did you know?" she cried.

"Monsignor told me to-day," Péron replied. "As for this jewel — I took it the day you found me in the attic and rated me so soundly for meddling with your chests."

Before he could prevent it, she caught his hand and kissed it.

"M. le Marquis," she exclaimed, joyful in the midst of her tears, "praise be to the saints, you shall be recognized at last!"

"'Tis for me to kiss your hands, my mother," Péron answered gently. "I am too touched, too overwhelmed with my obligations to you to know how to express my gratitude, but be assured that the boy you sheltered will never forget his childhood in this shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève."

"M. le Marquis," she began, "the —"

"To you I am Péron," he said, interrupting her; "and I am not a marquis at all, only Jehan de Calvisson, for my father's estates were confiscated to the king. For the time, at least, dear Madame Michel, I am only Péron the musketeer."

Plainly this did not satisfy her, but she held him in too much affection and respect to dispute his wishes. She went on to tell him that the three chests which she had so carefully guarded contained the evidences of his birth and title. In the hasty flight from Nançay, she had gathered his rich clothing together and packed it with some of the silver and jewels of his mother, and the documents that would in the future establish his identity beyond dispute.

"Ah, Monsieur Jehan," she said, wiping a tear from her eyes, "it was a dark time: your poor father was dead; they executed him at noon, and Père Antoine was with him. Only Jacques and I and Archambault, the cook, were at the château; the other servants had fled in fright, treacherous too, because of your father's misfortunes. Jacques was a born retainer of Nançay, as his fathers had been before him; but for a long time he had had this shop, being so expert a clockmaker that the marquis — God rest his soul — set him up here many, many years ago.

But Jacques had been married to me, and I had been madame's maid and yours. In my arms were you laid when you were born; and a beautiful baby you were, Péron; a fine, straight-limbed child, and so red that the marquise was worried. But see how beautiful your skin is now! Well, I was there that night with you and Jacques; we were up in the Tour de l'Horloge looking for Archambault, for he had gone to Poissy for tidings. It was moonlight, and presently we saw him. He was little and fat, even then; we saw him running like mad across the fields, and we knew that something was wrong. He came in gasping, his round eyes starting from his head, and told us that M. de Marsou, who is now called Marquis de Nançay, had sent a band of desperate men to Poissy, and they were coming to Nançay; and Archambault had, too, a message from Père Antoine telling us to save the child from his father's enemy. We had not a moment to lose, and we decided in a moment what to do. Archambault was as famous then as a cook as he is now; there was a full larder, for we three had not cared to eat, and the cellar was full of wine. He said, M. de Marcou's ruffians were drinking at Poissy and might be late, thinking their prey certain; and down he went and began to cook and set out a feast while Jacques carried

up wine from below, and I packed all I could into the three chests. We had one good horse — it belonged to Jacques — yet in the stable and a cart; and presently he and I carried out the three chests and put them into the cart while Archambault cooked and cooked. Oh, what a night it was! We dared not start right off, for we should surely meet them, and we had no place to hide but in Paris, and they were between us and the city. You were asleep, and we wrapped you in blankets and carried you out to the cart, and then Jacques drove us off to the woods and hid us among the thick trees and went back to help Archambault. I sat in the cart with you on my lap and prayed. It was a long time, and I could just see the château. By the sudden illumination, I knew they had come, and it seemed to me that they must hear my heart beat in the woods. *Mère de Dieu*, how afraid I was that you would wake up and cry! But you were an angel, Monsieur Jehan, and you slept on, out there in the forest, poor, fatherless baby, with no one but a weak woman to defend you. After a long, long time — so long that I was cramped and weary, and the horse, I think, was asleep — I heard some one coming through the underbrush and I was half dead with fear; but it was Jacques, and without a word he sprang

into the cart and began to pick his way out of the woods. I did not dare to speak, I only bent my head down on yours and prayed. It was hard work to get down through the brush to the road, out of sight of the house, and it was not until we were driving fast on the highway to Poissy that Jacques spoke. 'They are drunk,' he said, 'every mother's son of them, and filled with the feast, and Archambault is watching them. We pretended to be false to the dead marquis, and that we had prepared a feast for M. de Marcou. They think us traitors, and that we have disposed of the child. Mon Dieu!' he added after a minute, 'Archambault has lied so this night that I was afraid of him; I thought I smelled sulphur!' Well, that is really all," she said, smiling tearfully as she looked at Péron's grave and attentive face; "we drove straight through Poissy, and at St. Germain-en-Laye Jacques spread the report that the late M. de Nançay's boy was dead. Père Antoine met us on the road near Paris, and for two years we hid you, in constant fear of M. de Marsou; but after a while, I think he really believed you dead."

After she ceased speaking Péron was silent for a moment, and then he spoke with emotion:

"All that you have told me only increases my gratitude," he said.

As he spoke Jacques des Horloges came in from the shop and his wife told him that the cardinal had divined their carefully concealed secret and revealed it to Péron. The clockmaker listened to the young soldier's earnest thanks with strong feeling showing in his rugged face, but he made light of what he had done.

"Monsieur Jehan," he said bluntly, "but for your family, mine might have remained in the ditch. What I am I owe to the late marquis. I had a plain duty to perform toward his child, nothing more. It has been on my mind often, of late, to tell you the truth; but Père Antoine was fearful that you might be tempted to commit some rash act and so fall victim to the intrigues of Pilâtre de Nançay, as he is pleased to call himself."

They sat for a while longer talking of old times and of the future, the clockmaker and his wife manifestly disappointed that the cardinal had not immediately set up the new Marquis de Nançay. Péron forbore to tell them of M. de Nançay's arrest, keeping that as monsignor's secret.

The time drew near for the young musketeer to report for instructions, as directed by Father Joseph, and bidding his two humble friends an affectionate adieu, he set out for the palace. But he did not go directly there; he turned out of his

way to the Rue de Bethisi and climbed the stairs to the lodgings of Père Antoine. He knew that the priest was at home, for he saw a light shining under his door. Péron tapped on it three times, using the signal of his childhood, and immediately Père Antoine opened it and stood with outstretched hands on the threshold. His hair was snow white now and his gentle face was lined with care. His figure looked tall and thin in the simple black habit of his order, and he stooped a little more with the weight of added years. Péron told him the story of the cardinal's revelation, and from him he did not withhold the news of M. de Nançay's arrest. Père Antoine listened with a grave face to the story of the clock and the struggle.

"And you did not use your weapon?" he asked quickly.

"Nay, not with such advantage upon my side," Péron replied.

"I am thankful," said the priest, in a tone of relief; "I would have you a brave man and no coward. I cannot imagine how M. de Nançay permitted himself to be taken in the toils."

"You have not been in the household of the cardinal, as I have been, father," Péron rejoined smiling. "Had you been, you would not have been surprised. Richelieu's arm is long, and he

has all the adroit diplomacy, the subtlety of the Italian. I have heard it said that a cat will charm the bird it intends to devour; that the bird comes to it, fluttering its wings in its desire to escape, yet drawn by irresistible fascination. I know not whether this be true or not, but it is much like this with monsignor. In the years I have been with him, I have seen many an obstinate traitor tell his own secret. They say it was thus Chalais was lost; and there have been many others — how many no one knows but the guards of the cardinal and the keepers of the Châtelet."

Père Antoine shook his head thoughtfully.

"The cardinal is a great man," he said. "To you I will admit that I do not like his methods, but I believe that the state is safe under his guidance. His heart is single in its love of France. And I believe that he loves justice well enough to see you righted; it has ever been my prayer that I might be spared to see you in your father's place."

Péron did not immediately reply; he stood looking thoughtfully at the floor, and Père Antoine was beside him, his hand resting on the young man's shoulder. After a moment's pause Péron looked up into the priest's clear blue eyes.

"You were with my father at the last," he said in a low voice; "did he think of me at that hour, was there any message?"

"He spoke many times of his little boy," Père Antoine answered gently, "and at the last, when we walked hand in hand toward the scaffold, he sent you his blessing and bade me bring you up a Christian and a brave man, as your sainted mother would have wished. After that we said a prayer together, and he ascended the scaffold, repeating the hundred and twenty-ninth psalm :

"'Du fond de l'abîme, Seigneur, je pousse des cris vers vous; Seigneur, écoutez ma voix. Que vos oreilles soient attentives à la voix de ma prière. Si vous tenez un compte exact des iniquités, Ô mon Dieu, qui pourra, Seigneur, subsister devant vous?

"'Mais vous êtes plein de miséricorde; et j'espère en vous, Seigneur, à cause de votre loi. Mon âme attend l'effet de vos promesses, mon âme a mis toute sa confiance dans le Seigneur.'"

There was a pause, and then Père Antoine added: "He was a handsome man always, but on that morning I thought that his face wore more than earthly beauty; he died with perfect fortitude and at peace with God and man. The example of his life, clean and courageous, is before you, Jehan de Calvisson, and, please God, you shall follow it."

CHAPTER XIII

THE CARDINAL'S INSTRUCTIONS

IN the morning, Péron waited upon the cardinal for his instructions, and they were not only unexpected but also unwelcome. Richelieu was alone when he summoned his musketeer, and was walking up and down the salon; his red robe and cape were edged with fur, and on his breast he wore the broad ribbon and star of the order of Saint Esprit. His face was very pale, but his eyes burned with the fire of his restless spirit; he was in the mood to pursue a purpose with relentless energy. His orders to Péron were distinct and brief.

“You will get three or four stout knaves,” he said; “I do not wish my men employed, and you will not wear your uniform. There is a sufficient sum on the table to pay the hire of half a dozen men-at-arms, if they be needed. Take them, go to the Hôtel de Nançay, and give Mademoiselle de Nançay this letter. When she has read it, she will probably go of her own free will; if not, you will take her, and any female attendant she may

select, and ride to Poissy. I do not wish you to reach there before nightfall. Once there you will readily find a house that stands not two hundred yards from the Golden Pigeon; 't is a tall house, and over the door is the statue of the Virgin. The house is commonly called the Image de Notre Dame. Here you will take mademoiselle and her woman, but you will not permit them to go to either door or window. In the upper story you will find a party of my men. Before ten o'clock there will come to the door a company of not less than a dozen men, who will use a password, 'Dieu et le roi;' admit them and detain all as prisoners. There will be a fight, therefore take the precaution to put the women out of danger before they come. The mission has its perils, but I believe that you would prefer it to a more easy one."

Richelieu paused and looked keenly at the young man, whose face had flushed and paled alternately during the cardinal's long speech.

"Monsignor," he said, with hesitation, "I love an enterprise which is perilous and honorable, but I fear I cannot induce Mademoiselle de Nancay to go with me."

"The letter will, I think, remove her objections," the cardinal replied; "if not, it is for you to find means to induce her to go of her own will. Other-

wise," he added dryly, "I must find some one who has not your scruples."

Péron bowed gravely. "I will do my best to execute your orders, monsignor," he said.

"You have the purse and the letter," continued the cardinal, "that is all then; I trust that you will successfully fulfil your commission."

Péron had almost reached the door, when monsignor recalled him.

"Sieur de Calvisson," he said, "is it your wish to present a petition to his Majesty for the restoration of your estates and title, in view of the recent revelations?"

"No, monsignor," Péron replied; "for the present I am content to bear my father's name without making any effort to obtain his estates. I would not be known as a claimant to the title of Nançay."

Richelieu gave him a searching look.

"This is strange," he remarked. "Yesterday you were justly incensed against the marquis; to-day you have on a coat of another color."

The musketeer flushed. "My lord cardinal," he said, "the sudden change would entail much misery for others, — chiefly for the innocent, — and I, who have been a musketeer so long, am content to wait awhile longer until I see my way more plainly, though I am deeply grateful for

the interest your eminence has shown in my affairs."

"Ah, I see," said the cardinal, "the house on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre has a witchcraft of its own. Beware, M. de Calvisson, that you do not fail in your duty for the sake of a fair face."

With this warning, he dismissed the young soldier and went, with something akin to a smile on his stern face, to give his morning audience to an immense circle of fawning clients and courtiers, who thronged the ante-rooms of the Palais Cardinal and overflowed into the Rue St. Honoré.

Péron went out through the gardens and made his way slowly to the rear entrance of Archambault's pastry shop. He was in search of some men to accompany him on his mission, and he knew that the pastry cook was well acquainted with all sorts and conditions of society. Though bent on fulfilling it faithfully, Péron did not like his mission. The cardinal had given him no explanation of it, but he was not slow to divine the purpose of mademoiselle's ride to Poissy. She was to be used to entice some of her father's accomplices to the house called the Image de Notre Dame. Of that there could be no doubt; her arrival was a signal for a meeting of the conspirators, and from his brief acquaintance

with Renée de Nançay, Péron felt sure that she would not allow the cardinal to use her as a means for the destruction of the friends of the marquis. He would not have accepted the commission at all, preferring to brave Richelieu's displeasure, if it had not been for the cardinal's covert threat that if he did not undertake it some one else would who would be less delicate toward mademoiselle's feelings. But Péron would rather have met the desperate men alone than have encountered the merciless tongue of Renée de Nançay.

With these troubled and perplexing thoughts in his mind, the young musketeer opened the kitchen door of the pastry shop and walked into the midst of a scene similar to the one which he had witnessed in his childish visit, when he had been the jest of the soldiers. It was the busiest hour of the morning, and some of the cooks were roasting meat and some were rolling pastry, while others were making marvellous palaces and fantastic shapes of sugar. Here was the Palais Cardinal in sugar on top of a fruit cake, and there was an angel with a harp, and Noah's dove with the olive branch. There was a mountain of rissoles on one table and on another a royal pasty made of venison from the forest of St. Germain.

Péron passed unheeded through the busy scene,

and at the door of a small office next the public room he met Archambault. The pastry cook was stouter than ever, and the bald spot on the top of his head far exceeded the proportions of a poached egg; but he wore a look of placid content, and it was whispered that his fortune exceeded that of the late Duc de Luynes. At the sight of Péron, his fat face beamed; Jacques des Horloges had already told him of the cardinal's revelation, and he drew the young man into his private room, and shut the door.

"Sit down, M. le Marquis," he said, pointing to the table, on which was a bottle of wine, "and let us drink to your health and prosperity."

"Nay, good Archambault," replied Péron, smiling, "let the toast be your famous run from Poissy to save my life."

"Parbleu! it was a run," said Archambault, laughing; "I thought I should drop on the hill, Monsieur Jehan, but I made it, and the wine that we gave the canaille to drink was as good as this in which I drink your health, my marquis."

"No marquis as yet, Archambault," Péron replied; "only the Sieur de Calvisson, nor would I have it known that I am really the son of the late Marquis de Nançay."

Archambault set down his empty glass with a look of perplexity on his fat face.

"And wherefore not, Monsieur Jehan?" he asked; "surely monsignor —"

"Of that we will speak hereafter," said the young soldier, shortly, "and if I am ever marquis, I shall not forget your devotion to the orphan boy; but of that another time. I am bound on an errand outside of Paris, and I need four good men-at-arms. Do you think of any out of employment now?"

"There is one in the public room at this moment," Archambault replied at once. "I can always tell men by what they put into their stomachs. This man is a great fighter, by the way he eats. I have fed men for forty years, and I know their appetites: the ambitious man eats sparingly, his mind being elsewhere; the penurious man eats still less when he pays himself; when another pays he is greedy, but he will always have more than the worth of his money, and reviles you for a denier. The soldier craves strong meat and drink, the epicure wants a new dish, and the glutton cleans the platter. The man in yonder is a great fighter, not only by his food but by his looks; you may see him through the little window there from which I overlook my guests."

He pointed as he spoke to a small curtained window in the side of the room, and with some curiosity Péron looked out into the outer apartment. As usual, it was full of guests, but

Archambault showed him the man of whom he spoke. Péron saw, with surprise and pleasure, the broad shoulders, thick neck, great shock of grizzled black hair, and the broad nose and small eyes of Choin, the fencing master.

"The very man I need!" he exclaimed; and with a few words of thanks to the pastry cook, he opened the door and entered the public dining-room.

Choin met him with equal pleasure. The maître d'armes had long since forgiven his defeat in the tennis court, and entertained a kind of rough affection for his former pupil. Choin was alone at a small table, which gave Péron the opportunity he desired to explain to him the nature of his errand, and ask him to accompany him. The old swordsman was willing enough, for since the edict against duelling, such men found life in Paris dull and profitless compared with the old days. For, since the famous duel of M. de Bouteville and M. de Beuvron on the Place Royale which had sent two noblemen to the scaffold, sword practice had fallen out of favor in Paris.

"Pardieu!" said Choin, laying down his knife, "I will gladly go, Péron. The chance of a fight is as good as meat to me, and I can get you three other stout knaves and the horses, if you have the money to pay for all."

Péron took out the cardinal's purse and counted out a sufficient sum.

"We must have two led horses besides," he said, "for there will be two women to go also."

Choin gave him a quizzical look.

"What is this?" he asked bluntly, "an elopement as well as a possible fight?"

"You are mistaken," replied Péron, "I have been ordered to escort a lady and her woman to Poissy, nothing more."

His tone silenced Choin without entirely convincing him, but they completed the business arrangements without further delay. There was but little time to spare, and the fencing-master promised to meet Péron at the corner of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre at the appointed hour. Well satisfied with his transaction, the musketeer was making his way to the public entrance when he was suddenly accosted by a young man, very gayly attired and with a painted face. A second glance told Péron that it was his acquaintance of the previous day, the *Sieur de Vesson*.

"Sir musketeer," said the courtier, fiercely, "you escaped yesterday, but later you and I will have a reckoning."

"You may spin in a circle as often as you please, sir popinjay," replied Péron, with a shrug, "but wash the rouge off your cheeks

and eat strong meat before you try to fight with men."

The dandy stared at him in violent rage.

"Your jest will be a sorry one when next we meet!" he exclaimed.

"By that time you may be old enough to grow a moustache, monsieur," retorted Péron with a laugh, as he walked on and left the young fellow fuming in impotent fury.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE AT POISSY

WHEN Péron met Choin and his company at the corner of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, he had discarded his uniform and wore a dress more becoming to his actual station in life. It was a simple suit of dark blue with a short velvet cloak, and sword, and a hat with plumes, and his collar of rare Flemish lace was one which Madame Michel had produced from the chests in the attic. The change in apparel made a marked one in his appearance, and he looked the man of rank rather than the soldier of fortune. Even Choin noticed it, and glanced keenly at the well made figure and the handsome face of his quondam pupil. The maître d'armes had faithfully executed his part of the bargain, and was waiting with three rough and powerful-looking men-at-arms, who wore the nondescript dress of mercenary soldiers and had the air of being indifferent to the nature of their employment so long as it furnished money for liquor. They had also the two led horses for the women; and after a brief

inspection of his party, Péron proceeded at once to the Hôtel de Nançay, where his guards were still on duty. They reported that all was quiet within and without, and that no one had made any attempt either to enter or to leave the house.

It was with no very pleasant anticipations that Péron knocked at the door, and he was not surprised at the delay which followed. He had directed Choin and his men to ride into the lane to the garden gate, that their errand might be less conspicuous, and he was alone on the steps except for the sentinel who sat at the threshold, drowsy with his continuous and unexciting vigil. Péron was forced to knock three times, and was conscious that he was being scrutinized from the windows above, as he had been on the day before. At last, the door was opened reluctantly by a stout young woman with a plain face and sharp black eyes, who looked at him with a frown of displeasure; evidently she had been made to undo the latch against her own judgment.

"What do you want?" she demanded, in a sour tone, placing herself squarely in the opening.

"I am the bearer of a letter for Mademoiselle de Nançay," Péron replied sternly, "and I must present it to her at once."

"You take a high tone, monsieur," exclaimed

the woman, with a toss of her head; "but you shall not see mademoiselle unless she wishes it," and she slammed the door in his face.

Péron drew back half angry and half amused, but seeing the covert smile on the face of the soldier, he struck his sword peremptorily on the door, determined to gain admittance in spite of the women. He had not long to wait, however, and this time the young woman opened the door wide enough for him to pass through. She was sullen and silent, and only signed to him to follow up the stairs to the same salon where mademoiselle had burned the papers. Here Péron found Renée. She was standing by the window which overlooked the garden, and he saw that she had been observing Choin and his party at the gate, for she commanded a view of the lane. She was dressed in gray with a wide white linen collar, and her golden hair was knotted back more closely than usual. She was very pale, and looked as simple as a little nun; she evidently felt the day and night of suspense, but she bore herself with perfect composure. Her quick glance swept over her visitor, noting every detail of his changed appearance, and there was a little surprise in her eyes. He saluted her gravely, and without a word handed her the cardinal's letter. She inclined her head as she took it, her manner as

grave as his, but he observed that her hand trembled a little as she opened it. She read it through, and Péron saw her anger rising as she read; her eyes sparkled and a little spot of color came into each cheek, and once she stamped her foot on the floor. When she had finished — and she read it twice — she tore it in fragments and flung them on the ground. Péron expected an outburst; thought that she would refuse to go, and began to wonder what arguments he would use to persuade her. But he had no conception of what was really passing in mademoiselle's quick mind. She had just read the king's imperative orders for her to go to Poissy; her refusal would — so the letter said — imperil her father's life. She knew well enough why she was to go to the house of the Image of Notre Dame, and she was cudgelling her brains for a device to defeat monsignor. She knew her adversary and she set all her woman's wits to work. She had no thought of refusing to go; the risk was too great while her father was in the toils, but she intended to thwart his enemies. She stood for a while looking out of the window, while Péron expected her refusal to comply with the cardinal's orders. To his surprise, she turned at last to consent.

"I will go, monsieur," she said haughtily; "a

prisoner must obey her jailor, but I will not go without my woman."

"That is as you desire, mademoiselle," Péron replied, much relieved; "you will choose your own maid, and you will be treated with all due consideration."

She made him a mocking curtsy.

"I thank you humbly, monsieur," she said, with a contemptuous curl of her lip; "if you will permit me a half hour, I will wait on you at the garden gate, where I see you have already four cut-throats to attend me."

She walked past him, without waiting for a reply, and left Péron standing alone in the great salon. He did not remain; his face was scarlet with anger, and he went into the garden and sat down in the rustic seat, under the lime-tree, to wait her pleasure. From his reception, he could easily conjecture what the journey was likely to be, and he set his teeth hard at the thought. After all, had he not been foolish not to leave her to the mercy of some other soldier of the cardinal? Manifestly, she was the same as she had been when a child in the Château de Nançay, though it seemed that now she had lost the softness which had made her run out to the terrace to tell him she was sorry. He regretted his errand bitterly, and reproached himself for a fool

to have thrust himself into her way again. He was still occupied with these unpleasant reflections, when the door at the rear of the house opened and she came out with the insolent woman who had admitted him. Both wore cloaks and hoods, and mademoiselle's face was hidden by a black mask which gave her a mysterious look. Neither spoke, and Péron rose as they advanced, and preceding them to the gate, unfastened it. Choin was there with the horses, and in silence he and Péron assisted the two women to mount. When they were falling into position to begin their journey, mademoiselle spoke for the first time.

"Ninon rides with me," she said, as Péron would have assigned the maid to a place behind her mistress.

No opposition was offered to this arrangement, which seemed to surprise and disappoint mademoiselle, who was in the humor to pick a quarrel over a nutshell. So they started two abreast, where the streets were wide enough, and after they left the city limits, Péron rode on the other side of Renée de Nançay, while Choin and his three men followed close at their heels. They rode in silence, and nothing worth noting occurred until they came within sight of Cours la Reine, where were the iron gates which closed this end

of the three alleys planted with trees by the queen-mother for the pleasure of her court. As they passed to the right to take the road to Poissy, Péron noticed a man standing near the gates. He looked to be the retainer of some grandee and would not have attracted the young man's attention except for the pale blue knot on the shoulder of his black cloak. The stranger was staring hard at the party, and Péron gave mademoiselle a quick glance, but she made no sign of seeing the fellow, except to put up her hand to adjust her mask more closely, and Ninon was staring sullenly between her horse's ears. Péron watched the man narrowly, but he gave no indication of intending to quit his station, and they passed on, leaving him as they had found him.

For the first few leagues of their journey, mademoiselle was stubbornly silent; the men in the rear conversed in low tones, but Péron did not speak. Renée de Nançay, however, was busily engaged in meditating over her own plans, and it was necessary for her to know more about the young soldier riding beside her, and something of his intentions. After awhile, therefore, he was surprised by hearing himself addressed by her.

"Will you stop at Ruel, monsieur?" she asked, turning her face toward him, and he was conscious

of the brilliance of her dark eyes looking through the holes in her mask, which effectually concealed her expression.

"Nay, mademoiselle," he replied, "we shall push on to Poissy, which we must reach to-night."

"You are a hard taskmaster, monsieur," she said; "'t is a long ride, and Ninon and I have not been in the saddle since Christmas. Surely, you will give us a breathing space upon the way."

Péron hesitated. "Mademoiselle de Nançay," he said, "my orders are exacting, but it may be we can rest awhile this side of St. Germain-en-Laye."

"St. Germain-en-Laye!" repeated mademoiselle; "why, 't is but a league from Poissy, and it is five leagues and more from the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre to St. Germain-en-Laye."

"Yet after all, mademoiselle, six leagues is not a great matter," remarked Péron; "and I see that you are a fine horsewoman."

"I will stop at Ruel," she declared haughtily. "We shall reach Poissy in better time than you will wish for," she added with a bitter little laugh, the meaning of which he was not slow to interpret.

"Mademoiselle," he replied, "my instructions were especially directed against a halt at Ruel."

"But I wish to stop there," she said, in a tone of surprise at his daring to contradict her wishes.

Péron set his face sternly. "I am sorry," he said calmly, "but we will not stop at Ruel."

"I am sorry too, monsieur—I do not know your name?" she added, pausing for his reply.

He thought a moment and rightly conjectured that she would know nothing of the manner of her father's elevation.

"My name is Jehan de Calvisson," he said quietly.

"I am sorry then, Monsieur de Calvisson," she said, "but we will stop at Ruel."

Péron looked at the erect figure and the firm little chin showing below the mask, and felt that it would be a struggle; but he was determined to win. He did not reply but merely bowed gravely, and she was quick to interpret it as an assent.

"We are near Ruel now, are we not?" she demanded. "I should know the way."

"We are within a league of it, mademoiselle," he replied quietly, and then turned back to give Choin a few directions; when he again rode up to her side, his face wore a more composed expression.

"It is cold," she complained, "and the wind

blows; monsignor should try the journeys he recommends for others."

"'T is certainly not so pleasant as in the summer," Péron replied dreamily; "I can remember my first ride from Paris on this road, when the fields were green and the violets bloomed at Poissy."

"You are familiar with this road then?" she remarked, giving him a keen glance; "you know the way to Nançay?"

"It was to Nançay that I went, mademoiselle," he replied, "with my foster-father, the clock-maker of the Rue de la Ferronnerie."

For a moment mademoiselle was silent, then she looked at him and laughed a soft little laugh unlike the unmusical sounds with which she had mocked him.

"I know you," she said; "I was sure that I had seen you before; you are little Péron."

"Ay, mademoiselle," he replied, with a smile, "and I have still the bunch of violets from Nançay."

He could not see her face behind her mask, but he saw a little flush of color come across her chin and throat.

"The violets of Poissy, sir," she said lightly. "I little thought that you would be the one to take me there against my will; truly, the tables are turned."

His face flushed now and he was tempted to tell her that had he not come she would have been in worse hands; but that would be an appeal to her gratitude, and he held his peace.

"That is my misfortune, mademoiselle," he said, "rather than my fault."

"Sir, I think we have few misfortunes that are not our fault," she retorted sharply.

He smiled. "A few, mademoiselle," he said; "for instance, to be born poor and forced to seek a fortune with the sword or the spade."

She shrugged her shoulders. "'T is better to be born poor than born a fool," she retorted tartly.

"But worst of all to be born both poor and a fool," he replied calmly.

They were riding through a long lane lined on either hand with trees, and before them stood a cross which marked a certain turn in the road. At the sight of it mademoiselle drew rein so suddenly that she threw the little party into confusion. She wheeled in her saddle and looked over her shoulder.

"This is the wrong road," she said; "where is Ruel?"

"We have passed it, mademoiselle," Péron replied, with a composed face, but a smile lurked in his eyes.

She sat erect and motionless, but he knew that behind her mask she was in a storm of passion, for he saw her hand grip the bridle fiercely. She was debating in her mind whether to attempt to go back and risk the opposition of the four stout men behind or to make the most of defeat and go on with the best grace she could. Her temper, naturally high, was fully roused, and to yield a point was bitter. Moreover, she saw the amusement in Péron's eyes. Her woman reminded her of their situation.

"Come, mademoiselle," she said bluntly, "you know we must go one way or the other."

Renée turned on her quickly. "Hush!" she said sharply, and striking her horse briskly, she rode at a canter down the lane ahead of the party toward Poissy.

She had surrendered the point, and her escort drew a sigh of relief as he quickened his own pace to keep up with her, and all of them moved at a better gait. As his horse came abreast of hers, she gave him a sidelong glance.

"Manifestly, you were not born a fool, M. de Calvisson," she said, "if you were born poor."

Péron smiled in spite of himself.

"It was only strategy, mademoiselle," he said.

"I do not yet know how we passed Ruel," she

replied angrily, "though I have travelled over this road a thousand times."

"You did not observe the cross-roads when we reached them," he replied smiling; "there is this way by which Ruel can be entirely avoided."

"I am dull," she said; "I should have known that there are ever many ways around the hole of a fox."

Péron turned his face away to hide a smile at her covert thrust at Richelieu's house at Ruel.

After this they rode a long way in silence; she was obviously in an ill humor and vouchsafed only monosyllables in reply to any remark of her escort. As night approached it grew colder too and more unpleasant; a thick mist settled on the more distant landscape, and the meadows near at hand lay dark and deserted, while the trees loomed gigantic by the way. The moon was in its first quarter and set early, leaving a starry sky in which only a few light clouds drifted. There was no sound but the even beat of their horses' hoofs on the hard road. It was already pitch dark when they passed through St. Germain-en-Laye, and mademoiselle stubbornly refused to halt, having now veered around to a steady desire to reach Poissy with all speed. They trotted down the main street of the town, passing the inn,

where the revellers were in full sway, and were out on the highroad to Poissy again. Their way now lay through thick forest, and Péron was not without uneasiness, seeing her mood and not knowing the exact extent of the risk they ran of defeat. He would infinitely have preferred the clash of swords to this silent ride through unknown perils, with the responsibility of controlling a wilful and quick-witted young woman who was bent on his discomfiture.

It was with a sharp sense of relief that he saw the lights of Poissy ahead, and he unconsciously quickened his horse's gait, which brought the others up at a trot. As they reached the gates of the town, mademoiselle held out her hand to him.

"Will you wear this watch?" she said; "I am fearful of losing it, for the chain has broken and I value it; it belonged to my mother. I pray you keep it for me until to-morrow."

Péron took it with surprise; he could not refuse, though he was suspicious of her motive. He fastened it on a chain that he wore and thrust it into the bosom of his doublet, not without misgivings. The next moment they had entered the gates and he drew rein to make some inquiries for the house he sought. She heard him and laughed.

CHAPTER XV

THE SIGNAL

CHOIN had been too well instructed by Péron to express any surprise at finding the door of the tall house unfastened, and he and one of his men entered, and lighted some tapers they had brought with them, in two of the lower rooms. But before he assisted mademoiselle to dismount, Péron went into the house also, and finding his way to the stairs, began the ascent; he could not be satisfied until he knew whether Richelieu's men were there or not. On this point, however, he was soon reassured, for he had scarcely taken three steps up before he was softly challenged, and giving the cardinal's watchword, received the reply. He found five of monsignor's picked men sitting cross-legged on the floor, around a rushlight, playing cards with perfect nonchalance. The tightly shuttered windows hid this faint illumination from the outside, and the soldiers played piquet in such absolute silence that their presence was not easily detected even by any one on the lower floor. Péron only stayed

long enough to exchange a few words with the leader, a quiet man of middle age, who understood his business. Neither he nor Péron had any distinct idea of how large a party might be expected to follow the appearance of Mademoiselle de Nançay; but the advantage was with those in the house, and it seemed that they might be equal to twice their numbers. After a brief exchange of views on the best means of securing a large body of prisoners, Péron quietly descended the stairs once more and went out to assist mademoiselle to dismount. But he found that she and her woman were already standing on the step, a broad, flat stone at the entrance, and she was in no very good humor at being compelled to wait in the cold. He apologized for the delay and invited her to enter the room at the rear, a small one, which he had selected as being near enough to the stairs for him to be able to get her to a place of safety in the event of a fight. But he forgot her wayward temper; she would have none of the back room.

"I should die here!" she announced, shivering at the chill and the bleak aspect of the place, for the house was only partially furnished, and that with the plainest of furniture; "I will go into the front room; there I can have a fire, and at least two tapers."

"But, mademoiselle," remonstrated Péron, "I chose this room for serious reasons. I —"

"But, monsieur," she retorted tartly, "I choose the other for serious reasons. Sirrah, get some fagots and build me a fire," she added sharply, addressing one of Choin's troopers who was lounging on a settle in the larger room, which she had now entered.

The man roused himself at her words, and stumbled awkwardly to his feet, but he looked to Péron for orders. Mademoiselle de Nançay stamped her foot on the floor.

"I tell you I will have a fire," she said angrily.

Choin had entered as she spoke, and her peremptory manner angered the maître d'armes.

"Mademoiselle shall have a fire if our leader orders it; otherwise not," he said bluntly.

Renée stared at the stout Italian, her great eyes flashing in the loop-holes of her mask, but she was quick to recognize honest courage even of the lower sort, and in her heart she forgave Choin for his brusque manner. But before there was a clash between the two, Péron interfered and ordered the soldier to build a fire if he could find fuel enough in the house. Fortunately there was a small supply, the place having been recently occupied, and mademoiselle sat down, still cloaked and masked, to watch the building

of the fire, while Péron sent the horses away in the charge of another trooper to the stables of the Golden Pigeon, to be fed and watered that they might be in condition for future use. He then gave his thoughts to the disposition of his men; Choin he posted at the rear entrance to the house, which he had reconnoitered and found opened into a deserted garden surrounded by a low wall. For the time being he allowed the other men to rest in the room which mademoiselle had refused to occupy, and for himself retained the place at the front door, which he believed to be the point of danger. There was a small grille in the upper half of this door, and through this he could dimly see the black outline of the houses across the lane, and above, the far-off glimmer of the stars. It was too dark to see twenty yards away, and the night was very still though it was not yet eight o'clock. The man in command above stairs had told him that the cardinal's orders were that all shutters should remain tightly closed and no light be shown. This being the case, Péron could not divine how mademoiselle's presence in the house could be discovered or serve as a decoy for the conspirators. He was sorry that on this point he had not asked for more precise instructions, but remembered that she was not to appear at the window, and he could only suppose that their

spies had seen her arrival and would report it. But even on this head he was not satisfied; he thought of her determination to pass in full view of the Golden Pigeon, and he did not know what significance might be attached to that, or if it had any beyond the wilfulness of a spoiled beauty. He had, too, a quick sympathy for her in her unpleasant situation, — her father in the hands of his worst enemy, and she compelled to play the rôle of a traitress to her own party. He could understand and even pardon the bitterness of her mood when he remembered all that she had to undergo. What to do with her, and how to protect her, was a problem which troubled him much; for to try to control her motions was like trying to handle a thistle. He had every expectation of a sharp affray, and it was hardly probable that any number of desperate men would allow themselves to be entrapped without much bloodshed, and he did not know how near or dear some of them might be to Renée de Nançay. What she would do under such circumstances was a perplexing problem. Unless he used force, he could scarcely hope to keep her out of the reach of danger. He had no personal anxieties about the result of the struggle, but what should he do with mademoiselle? Her woman, too, he regarded as mischievous, and she belonged to that

heroic build of womanhood which can strike as stiff a blow as most men and better than some. Her stubborn loyalty to her mistress recommended her to him, but he recognized an additional danger in the fire of her fierce black eyes. That she was equal to stabbing one or more of his men in the back while they were engaged with her friends in front, he did not doubt. Yet to lock Ninon and her mistress in a room overhead was a measure which he could not view with favor. He had had no previous dealings with women, and he had a profound dislike of using strong measures toward the weaker sex.

While he was revolving all these matters in his mind, the man who had taken the horses to the Golden Pigeon returned and reported that all seemed quiet enough, though he had observed a number of men gathered in the courtyard of the inn, and he had noticed that all wore knots of pale blue ribbon somewhere about them, either on hat or cloak or sword hilt. But for the rest there was nothing remarkable, and they apparently took no heed of him, although he had noticed two knaves stealing into the stable to stare at his horses. For the moment Péron was uneasy with the thought that these might be stolen, but reflected that the landlord of the Golden Pigeon was too prudent a man to take any risk of having

to make good the loss of seven horses with their equipments.

Having disposed his sentinels to his satisfaction, Péron went to see if all was well with his involuntary guests. He had no doubt of the meaning of the pale blue ribbons now, and grew more alert and in better spirits as the danger approached. He was a born fighter, and but for the responsibility of mademoiselle's presence, would have enjoyed the prospect of a sharp skirmish; an adventure without peril was never to his taste.

He found the two women alone in the room, where the fire was still smoking, having been kindled with partially green wood. There was a plain oaken settle in the room, and two or three stiff chairs; there was no rug on the floor, but it was partly covered with rushes. It was a bare enough place; and he noticed that they had extinguished one of the tapers, leaving the other burning in a niche on the wall. Ninon lay, half reclining, on the settle, her cloak rolled up into a pillow under her head, while mademoiselle sat bolt upright in one of the chairs by the fire, staring angrily into the flames. She had laid aside cloak and mask and was revealed in her simple gray gown, her hair disordered by the ride, lying in loose curls on her shoulders. She had a bril-

liant color in her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with anger; yet she looked unusually beautiful, the very picture of a wilful, spoiled child of fortune. Péron, standing at the door, bowed to her gravely and asked if he could do anything more to make her comfortable.

"Ay, sir," she said haughtily; "send for my horse and let me go on to the Château de Nançay."

"I would gladly, but for my orders, mademoiselle," he replied, with truth.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I am tired of your orders, M. de Calvisson," she remarked. "If I were a man, I would take orders from no one but my own conscience."

"Mademoiselle, if you owed monsignor as much as I do," he replied dryly, "you would serve him from love and not from fear."

She elevated her eyebrows with an air of incredulity.

"Ciel!" she exclaimed; "is it possible that you love Cardinal de Richelieu?"

"I should be an ingrate if I did not," he retorted boldly. "It is always possible, mademoiselle, for a statesman to make enemies; M. le Cardinal has made many, but had he no other friend, I would be one still."

She smiled scornfully. "I admire your devo-

tion, monsieur," she said; "it is doubtless worth the hire."

"Mademoiselle," Péron exclaimed hoarsely, "you take advantage of your sex!"

"You forget, M. de Calvisson," she replied, "that a prisoner has no resource but her tongue. However, I beg your pardon, I spoke in anger."

He bowed gravely, too deeply incensed to reply, and remembering the cardinal's instructions about the shutters, he walked across the room toward the nearest of the two windows and began to make the fastenings more secure. As he did so, mademoiselle rose deliberately, and taking the taper in her hand, walked to the other window.

"Is this also secure, monsieur?" she asked, in a tone of propitiation. "'T is well to fasten the bolts, for we two women need a little undisturbed rest."

As she spoke she laid her hand on the bolt, and Péron, deceived by her manner, turned to examine that shutter with no unusual haste. So it happened that before he suspected her intention, she had flung open the blind, and in an instant tossed the burning taper out into the darkness of the night. He sprang forward and fastened the shutter in a moment, but he fancied that the mischief was already done, for she stood laughing and looking at him with shining eyes, the same

look of triumph on her face that it had worn on the day when she burned the papers. What manner of signal it was, though, he was at loss to divine, but he saw that he must watch her as closely as a cat watches a mouse, or she would defeat every plan of the cardinal's as easily as she routed him at every point. But he had no wish to subject himself to the sharp cuts of her tongue, nor did he wish to intrude on the little privacy she had. Fortunately, he was relieved of either necessity by seeing a hammer and some nails in the corner by the door. He called one of the men and briefly directed him to nail up the shutters as quickly as possible. This was an easy task, and when it was done, he sent the man away.

"Mademoiselle," he said gravely, "I regret to take this extreme measure, but there is no alternative."

She was again sitting by the fire, and she looked up with a roguish face.

"I thank you for the greater security, monsieur," she replied with a smile. "There is a proverb about fastening the door of a house after the thieves have gone."

Péron bowed gravely. "I understand you, mademoiselle," he replied; "'t is evident that — in spite of Ruel — I was born a fool."

With this, he went out and closed the door that the two might be undisturbed, and resumed his place at the grille, angry and mortified, but determined to make amends for past blunders by redoubled vigilance.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CARDINAL'S SNARE

MORE than an hour had passed in this tedious watch; the stillness without was scarcely greater than the stillness within. Mademoiselle and her woman remained in their quarters, and the soldiers waited indifferently for the outcome. From his post by the front door, Péron again and again looked out at the grille and tried to search the darkness with his anxious eyes, but without result; he was becoming more and more convinced that Mademoiselle de Nançay had in some manner defeated the cardinal's plans. But his labor was not to be as fruitless as he supposed, and Renée was, in one point, to meet with less success than usual. Just when the situation seemed least promising, Péron heard Choin coming on tiptoe toward him. The hall was lighted dimly by a rushlight sitting on the floor, and he could not see the face of the maître d'armes well enough to discern his expression. The Italian came close to him before speaking.

"There is some one in the garden," he whispered; "I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs on

the road, and now I hear the brush crackling by the wall on the east side."

"Good!" ejaculated Péron, with relief; "I am tired of sitting, like a rat in a trap. How many horses were there?"

He asked this as they walked swiftly to the rear entrance.

"Only one," replied Choin, "and there was a long pause after he stopped at the end of the wall."

They had now reached the door, and Péron opened the grille softly and looked out. At first he could see nothing in the darkness, but after a moment he became accustomed to it and was able to discern the dark outlines of a man coming cautiously toward the door. Péron signed to Choin to be silent, and both waited in breathless suspense. After another pause, evidently spent in reconnoitering, the stranger advanced more carelessly. To the surprise of the watcher within, he made straight for the door and tapped softly twice and loudly once. It was undoubtedly a preconcerted signal, and Péron, by signs, told Choin to withdraw from sight when the door should be opened; then he answered with the password given him by the cardinal, which seemed to dispel the visitor's doubts.

"Open," he said in a low tone, "'t is I, Gaston; why do you keep me so long?"

Without replying, Péron flung the door open, standing well in the shadow behind it as he did so. But his caution was unnecessary; the stranger pushed in, seemingly anxious to be within the house. In a moment the bolts slipped behind him and he was a prisoner, but he had no suspicion, as yet, of the trap into which he had fallen. He was a man of medium stature, closely muffled in a dark cloak, the collar turned up about his face and his plumed hat set low over his forehead. As he entered, Péron's quick eye caught the gleam of golden spurs on the heels of his high leather boots. He carried his sheathed sword in his hand, as if he were prepared for any misadventure. He took no heed of the way the door was closed nor of Péron, and advanced to the middle of the hall before he observed Choin, who had posted himself with his back against the main entrance. The noise of his arrival had roused the soldiers in the room to the left, and two of them came to the door and thrust out their heads to stare at him. Something in the stillness of the house, in the strange faces of the men, made him stop short and wheel around to look at Péron; the light was too dim for him to see plainly, but he was disturbed. This was not the reception that he had looked for in this place.

"What is this?" he ejaculated in a high, peev-

ish tone, a tone that Péron seemed to recognize.

"Where is M. de Nançay?"

"He has not come," replied Péron, promptly, "but Mademoiselle de Nançay is here."

He spoke at random and by impulse, but he saw that his words had done much to remove the stranger's suspicions.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, "'t is strange to send only a girl — at such a time. Where is she?"

"This way, monsieur," Péron replied, curious to see the result of this accident, and tempted, too, to confront mademoiselle with her friend.

Ninon opened the door in answer to his summons, and without a word the stranger thrust past her into the room, cloaked and bonneted as he was. Péron followed too quickly for Ninon to shut him out, for he had no mind to leave this new-comer to talk privately with Renée de Nançay. In spite of her woman's angry glances, he closed the door behind him and leaned against it, watching the other two. He was not prepared, however, for the sequel. When they entered, mademoiselle was sitting by the fire, with her back toward them, and she only glanced up carelessly, expecting Péron. At the sight of the stranger, however, she sprang to her feet, and as he dropped the edge of his cloak and uncovered his head, she recoiled with a cry of terror.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, "why did you come here? I made the signal to warn them away."

"Mordieu!" he cried in a tone of consternation. "What is this? I was to come here alone, I have seen no one else; into what trap have I fallen?"

"They must have sent a messenger to you," Renée said, recovering her composure; "you must have missed him on the road. *Mère de Dieu!*" she added with fresh trepidation, "and they will think you in Paris; and yonder," she pointed at Péron, "is the cardinal's musketeer!"

The stranger turned as she spoke, and, throwing his cloak partly over his face, made a spring for the door. Péron drew his sword, and as he did so, Renée shrieked aloud.

"Stop, in heaven's name!" she cried; "do not touch him, M. de Calvisson, it is Monsieur!"

Péron dropped the point of his sword, but stood firm.

"You cannot pass, monsieur," he said. He was doubtful of the truth of mademoiselle's assertion, thinking she intended to deceive him; but at his words the stranger let fall his cloak.

There could be no longer any doubt of his identity; there was the full eye, the hooked nose, the full round chin of the Bourbons. The likeness that Gaston d'Orléans bore to the king and

to the queen-mother could not be easily mistaken, even in the plain dress he wore as a disguise. Péron had seen him many times before and knew him well; he saluted gravely and stood irresolute; the cardinal's orders had not mentioned a prince of the blood, indeed he had told M. de Nançay that the Duke of Orleans would make his terms with the king. Had Richelieu been deceived, or had he duped the marquis? These were perplexing questions, and they flashed in rapid succession through Péron's mind, as he stood looking at the flushed and angry face of the prince. Orleans was not noted either for courage or fortitude in supreme moments. Finding himself fairly checkmated, he had but one thought, and that was for his own safety. He turned and began to upbraid mademoiselle.

"How came you here, girl?" he demanded peevishly. "Has that precious father of yours turned coward and deserted his friends?"

Renée's eye flashed. "Monsieur," she said haughtily, "my father is no traitor to his allies; he has never betrayed a man who perilled his life and honor for him!"

The thrust went home; the fate of the unhappy and noble Montmorency was not yet forgotten, and the prince gnawed his lip in silence. But mademoiselle was not done.

"My father is now a prisoner," she said, "in the hands of that man who is alike pitiless and supreme, and I was sent here at the king's orders to decoy your friends to this house. I tried to prevent it — I made the signal, and indeed I am sure that no one else will come; but monsignor has certainly made one successful cast of his net to-night;" and she smiled scornfully, as she looked at the handsome, vacillating face of Gaston d'Orléans.

"Pardieu!" he muttered, "I am lost. The king's orders! Your father in the hands of the cardinal, and my mother in Brussels! I am lost! I am lost!" and he paced up and down the room, wringing his hands like one possessed. He who never decided anything was suddenly forced to face an exigency which demanded decision.

It was a strange scene: Péron stood like a statue by the door, his drawn sword in his hand, and near him Ninon was gazing wide-eyed at the prince as he paced to and fro. By the fire, Renée stood erect, her face pale but her eyes aglow with indignation, the most composed person present.

Presently Monsieur halted in front of Péron.

"Put up your sword," he said pettishly. "I am a prince of France, and you dare not oppose me. I shall go out of this house as I came — alone!"

Péron had been revolving many thoughts in

his mind during the brief time since the discovery of his prisoner's identity, and he had to come to a decision.

"It is true that I might risk the king's displeasure by opposing your highness," he said quietly, "but consider for one moment the situation. I am not in supreme command in this house. There is here a capitaine de quartier. I heard his voice on the stairs a moment since, and the place is full of soldiers. If you step out into that hall—if you attempt to go away—they will seize you, and it will be a public matter in five minutes."

"But, mon Dieu!" cried the prince, in a faint voice, "what can I do? My brother will never forgive me. The cardinal will ruin me! They will know I am here, if I stay! Where is the advantage?"

"If your highness will think a moment, you will see," Péron answered more calmly, as he saw the other's absolute impotence in the face of a crisis. "If you remain quiet, no one need know your identity but Mademoiselle de Nançay and myself."

Gaston peered at him eagerly; his face had grown pinched and not unlike the king's when Louis was suffering from one of his seasons of ill health.

"How can I trust you, man?" he moaned fret-

fully. "I can trust no one; every one betrays me and every one suspects me, even my own brother!"

"Because you betray every one," was on Péron's lip; but he restrained himself, though, looking beyond Monsieur's cowering figure, he saw the contempt and hatred on mademoiselle's proud young face.

"You may trust me, your highness," Péron replied quietly. "I pledge my honor that no man shall know you if you will stay in the room across the hall until daybreak, and then ride with me to Paris."

Monsieur's face, already white, turned the color of ashes.

"To Paris!" he cried, collapsing into a chair. "To monsignor?"

"To monsignor, your highness," said Péron, grimly. "My orders are absolute."

The prince covered his face with his hands, and there was a moment of silence. In it Renée's eyes met the young soldier's with a sympathetic flash of contempt for the crouching heap in the chair. Monsieur's thick curls fell disordered around his face, and his white hands trembled as he held them over his eyes. Suddenly he rallied and sat up, looking defiantly at Péron.

"You can prove nothing against me, sir mus-

keteer," he said. "I came here, it is true—but how do you know my errand?"

"It is true that I do not know it, your highness," he replied gravely, "neither do the men without know you; there is your advantage."

"Tush!" said Gaston, with rising courage, "'t is all a trap of Richelieu's; a clear evidence of his persecution of me. My brother shall know it!"

He rose from his chair and felt in his pockets for a comb, which he found, and began to arrange his curls.

"Your pardon, mademoiselle," he said peevishly. "I could not see for my disordered hair." Then he turned to Péron. "Now, sir," he added, "I will go to your prison until daybreak, but you shall all suffer for this!"

Péron laid his hand on the latch.

"I pray your highness to assume your disguise," he said; "we must cross the hall, and it is now full of soldiers."

The prince resumed his cloak and hat with some muttered imprecations, but he was careful to muffle his face before the door was opened. As Péron had said, the entry was full of troopers, but at a sign from him they all fell back and allowed the prince to cross the hall to a room on the other side, which his captor took care should be secure

before he left him there to rest for the few hours that remained before daybreak.

Meanwhile Péron found enough to do to make his arrangements and keep his pledge to the Duke of Orleans. However, the others were tolerably satisfied with the ease with which they had secured the prisoner, and did not press the question of his identity, after their leader told them that he was not at liberty to reveal it. Whatever their suspicions were, they did not soar as high as the truth, and Péron felt confident that all would go well, if there was no attempt at a rescue by the other conspirators.

But all the while another matter troubled the mind of the young soldier. Monsieur was a dangerous prisoner. He had been in numerous plots against his brother and the cardinal, and in open rebellion before, and never yet had offended beyond the king's forgiveness. What would be the result of carrying such a prize to Richelieu? It was a question which no man could answer. And Monsieur had all the spitefulness and ill temper of his mother. More than this, had the cardinal purposely spread his net for this royal fish, or had he believed one of d'Orléans's numerous confessions? The last was clearly impossible; monsignor knew the prince too well. Manifestly, the declaration of Monsieur's reconciliation had been made to

entrap de Nançay ; and now the point remained — would the capture of Gaston be welcomed, or would his captor suffer for it? Péron found it impossible to decide, and set about his duty with a heavy heart; it seemed that this fish might be large enough to break the meshes of his net or drag him into the deep sea.

CHAPTER XVII

MONSIEUR AND MONSIGNOR

BEFORE daybreak, Péron was forced to provide a meal for Monsieur, who, finding himself in an uncomfortable situation, was disposed to be as peevish and refractory as possible. Without a single trait of his great father, Henri Quatre, Gaston de Bourbon, Duke of Anjou and of Orleans, inherited all the deceit, the petty ambition, and the vindictiveness of his mother, Marie de' Medici, lacking however her tenacity of purpose. While the Thirteenth Louis inherited the sternness of the great Henri, the younger brother was as unstable as water. Shut up, against his will, in the house at Poissy, and knowing himself to be once more in the clutches of the cardinal, whose distrust of him was only equalled by his contempt, Monsieur had but one thought, and that was of the safest way to desert his fellow conspirators.

He demanded food and wine to keep up his failing spirits, and when both were brought from the Golden Pigeon, he ate voraciously and drank deeply, gaining in courage at every potation. He

had no fear of the king, his brother, Louis had always forgiven him, although it was with the indifference of disdain; but of Richelieu he had a wholesome dread, and he knew that monsignor, despising and suspecting him, knowing him to have been many times guilty, desired above all else to cut him off from the line of succession. The more wine he drank the more determined he became to extricate himself from this difficulty, as he had extricated himself from many others. To a man who had but little shame, it mattered not how much had been revealed by M. de Nançay or by others. Monsieur seldom stopped for a lie, and never for a prevarication.

When they set out on their ride to Paris, he was in a humor to betray his best friends, and he showed it by a peevish lack of courtesy toward Mademoiselle de Nançay. He would not approach her, but insisted on riding at the head of the party, kept under guard by Péron, however, who was continually afraid he would try to give them the slip. The prince had been provided with a mask, and, muffled in his cloak, was not recognized by any of the party except the captain of the guard sent by the cardinal. This man had ridden behind Monsieur but a little way when he leaned over and spoke in a whisper to Péron.

"Pardieu!" he said with a grimace, "I see what bird we have caught. He took but one trait of his father, and that is his seat in the saddle; he rides like a Béarnese."

Péron made a sign to him to keep silence, and the little troop moved on; mademoiselle and her woman in the center, and Choin commanding the men in the rear, for they were not without anticipation of a skirmish in the forest between Poissy and St. Germain-en-Laye. They had set out at daybreak from the house of the Image de Notre Dame, to avoid any attempt at an early rescue of the Duke of Orleans, and now the sun was just rising over a quiet landscape. In the east the sky was golden; two great white clouds, touched with rose and amethyst, floated upward before the sun, as though the morning spread its wings. The first long shafts of sunlight made wide avenues of glory through the forest, and there was the merry twittering of birds in every thicket. Péron felt his spirits rise with the day; whatever the outcome of his mission, he had steadily endeavored to do his duty, and he had assuredly accomplished something of importance. Aware now of how nearly Renée de Nançay had defeated his plans, he could not suppress a feeling of curiosity to know how she regarded the turn of events. He cast more than one searching glance at her erect

figure, as she rode in their midst, but he could make nothing of that mask, and she had not vouchsafed him a word that morning. He had sent her a breakfast, but had received no thanks; and when they were preparing to depart, she had mounted before he could come to her assistance, being delayed by Monsieur's peevish assertions of authority. He remembered the look of contempt she had given the prince, and he saw that she was as anxious now to avoid Gaston as he was to avoid her. They made a strange party. Good discipline and a recognition of the importance of their errand kept the soldiers quiet and orderly, and the two women were as speechless as mutes; while a little in advance rode Monsieur, masked and muffled, and as fretful as a spoiled child caught in a naughty act.

Notwithstanding the anxieties of the leaders, the ride through the forest was quiet enough, and they entered St. Germain-en-Laye at a sharp canter, passing through the principal street and out again without a pause; for in the towns was the greatest risk that the identity of d'Orléans would be discovered. As the morning advanced, they began to meet travellers on the highroad, and Monsieur sank yet deeper into the folds of his cloak and grew more and more sullen. Once Péron was certain that the prince was recognized. A party

of horsemen rode by, manifestly fresh from court and wearing the colors of Condé, and more than one of them turned sharply to stare at the masked rider. However, no one accosted them, and Péron breathed freer at the end of each league. Their horses were fresh and covered the ground easily, and it was not long before they came in sight of Ruel. As they drew near, Péron, who was now at mademoiselle's side, addressed her.

"This time we will go through Ruel, Mademoiselle de Nançay," he said with a smile.

"As you please," she answered with a shrug of her shoulders; "this time I gain nothing and lose nothing by it."

"Forgive me for having duped you, mademoiselle," he replied, "and believe me that I respect such loyalty to your convictions."

"It is I who should beg your pardon, M. de Calvisson," she said frankly; "I said sharp things to you last night, but I recall them. Sir, I do not blame you for your attachment to the cardinal; he is, at least, a man. As for that creature yonder," she threw out her hand with a gesture of contempt,—"St. Denis! he is not worthy a thought, much less a drop of an honest man's blood. That cowardly, treacherous boy would sell the noblest men of France for the sake of his own miserable comfort. Heaven forgive me, if I

have ever furthered any cause of his; I can never forgive myself!"

Her vehemence, the earnest tone of her voice, though she spoke so low, gave Péron a glimpse of another Renée de Nançay, — not the spoiled, haughty beauty, but an earnest, passionate woman. He glanced at Monsieur's unconscious figure and smiled; his own heart was lighter.

"It is a pity," he answered, as low spoken as she, "that the brother of his majesty should be — what he is!"

"'T is a pity, monsieur," Renée replied sharply, "that he was ever born."

"At least he has served one useful purpose," Péron said: "he has shown Mademoiselle de Nançay that he is not worth the trouble that he has made in this realm."

"If I were the king," she retorted, "I would soon end it; I would shut Monsieur up in the Castle of Vincennes."

"Ah, mademoiselle, you forget what the life of the king would be," he replied; "you forget the tears and intercessions of Madame la Mère."

"Tears are easier shed than blood," she said; then added suddenly, "there is some unusual stir in Ruel; there is the cardinal's livery."

They were entering the town, and Péron, looking about for the first time, saw that, as mademoiselle

had said, there was an unusual commotion. The courtyard of the inn was crowded, and there were, too, the colors of Richelieu. Monsieur had perceived them and fallen back, nearer to Renée than he had been the whole morning, and was evidently uneasy and angry. Péron urged his horse past the others, and approaching the inn inquired the meaning of the stir.

"The cardinal is here," was the reply; "he came this morning."

Further inquiry developed the fact that monsignor had reached his own house at Ruel some hours earlier and was there then. This was better fortune than Péron could have expected, and it lifted a load from his heart. It was easier to get Monsieur to the cardinal's house here unnoticed than in Paris, where he was almost certain to be recognized at once. But it was no easy matter to get the unhappy prince to see the affair in the same light. To his mind it was no better to face Richelieu at Ruel than at the Palais Cardinal. Monsieur had never been able to meet an ordeal, and he was not any better prepared than usual. At first he refused loudly to move an inch, holding his horse's head steadily toward Paris and declaring that he would see no one, go to no one but the king.

"Your highness may be recognized if you

“speak so plainly,” Péron reminded him, “and in that case I cannot answer for the results.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” cried Gaston, in alarm; “surely, man, they would not hurt me! My brother would never forgive them if they dared to touch me.”

“Your highness is safe,” Péron replied dryly, “but you would be more so with the cardinal. He is a wise man and will devise some way out of this difficulty, I doubt not.”

Monsieur gasped; he was relieved, but he could not make up his mind. Péron laid his hand on his bridle rein.

“*M. le Prince,*” he said bluntly, “yonder come some gay gentlemen; if I mistake not, *M. de Bas-sompierre* is among them. If he sees your highness, this matter will be the talk of the galleries of the Louvre to-night, the gossip of the Marais, the tattle of the Port Antoine.”

“*Parbleu!*” ejaculated Monsieur, in a vexed tone, “you are right. Go on, man, to the cardinal—or to the devil—it must be my unlucky star!”

Péron did not wait for another change; he gave his orders quickly, and they all proceeded at a trot to the cardinal’s house. The court was full of musketeers, and there was a guard at the door; but Péron was recognized and easily gained admittance for himself, Monsieur, and the two women. The others remained without, finding friends and

comrades among the guards. Péron sent a message to the cardinal, and in a few moments received his orders to leave mademoiselle and her woman in the anteroom below and to come to him with his prisoner, of whose importance a hint had been conveyed. An usher led them up the broad stairs, and opened the door for them to enter the cardinal's presence. The prince was still masked and muffled, and walked sullenly into the room, which was a large one, richly furnished and with a bright fire burning on the hearth. The hangings were of splendid tapestry, and the floor was covered with fine rugs. Richelieu was better able to gratify his taste for magnificence now than when the young Bishop of Luçon bought the second-hand black velvet bed of his aunt, Madame de Marconnay, and borrowed money to buy his first silver dishes.

Péron followed close on the heels of Monsieur and closed the door behind them. They found the cardinal alone; he was standing with his back to the fire, and he had the advantage, for the light fell full on their faces, leaving his in the shadow. He was not a large man, thin and of medium stature, yet in his red robes and with his coal-black moustache and chin tuft and his white hair, he was at once an imposing and remarkable figure. The restless genius of the man shone through the

immovable mask of his pale face, as the fire burns within an alabaster lamp. Péron saw that he recognized Monsieur at a glance; he did not show any surprise, however, but briefly ordered Péron to keep the door against all comers; then he turned to the prince with a cold smile on his thin lips.

"Will your highness be seated?" he said smoothly. "Had I known that they would find you at Poissy, I should have prepared a more suitable reception."

Finding that he was known, the Duke of Orleans flung himself into a chair by the fire and tore off his mask, disclosing a flushed and angry but frightened face.

"As usual," he said sullenly, "I have been treated with malice. I am always persecuted, I tell you, monsignor; my brother shall hear my version of this."

Richelieu looked at him with fierce eyes.

"His majesty has already heard your highness many times," he remarked dryly. "The story is always much the same."

"I have been badly used," retorted Monsieur. "If anything goes wrong, I am always the one to be blamed; if any man is a traitor, I am always accused of being his accomplice, yet no brother could love the king more dearly than I!"

"Your highness has a singular way of showing your affection," Richelieu rejoined calmly. "It should be remembered that the King of France is the state, and he who fosters conspiracy against the state fosters it against his majesty."

"You are fond of giving me advice, monsignor," d'Orléans said sullenly, "but you cannot prove—this time—that I have singed my fingers."

"Ah, M. le Prince, that is an old argument," returned the cardinal, "and you and I are old friends. Let us remember M. de Montmorency and M. de Chalais, and a few more whom I might name, and then let us adjust our thoughts to the matter in hand."

Monsieur made no reply; he thrust his feet out before the fire and sank deeper into his chair. Richelieu looked at him from head to foot, with a glance that was full of the most profound contempt.

"I have talked with the king," he said coldly, "and his majesty is not disposed to let this matter pass without a public example. The queen-mother and your highness cannot have equality with the king; neither can we close our eyes to these intrigues, which not only corrupt the loyalty of our great nobles but lay our affairs open to the court at Madrid. This realm cannot be ruled by two factions; one must fall. Naturally, his maj-

esty is not disposed to be at the head of that one."

"I do not believe that my brother intends any evil against me!" retorted the prince; but his face grew a shade paler, and his lynx-eyed adversary noted the change.

"There always comes a time when a king must sacrifice his feelings as a man," he remarked dryly.

"Ah, yes — I remember that you made Louis do so in the case of Mademoiselle de la Fayette," Monsieur retorted spitefully.

"And this being a far more serious matter demands a more serious remedy," replied the cardinal, unmoved. "Is it natural, in making an example, that the most important man in a faction — the one in whose name all the treasonable correspondence is conducted — should be passed over with forgiveness while the lesser ones suffer? In a sense, that was the case when Henri de Montmorency lost his head, but your highness knows that it is not my way. I shall feel it my duty to advise his majesty to administer justice, and justice alone."

The prince writhed under those pitiless black eyes.

"I have done nothing," he said, weakening more and more; "it is all the fault of the others; I only

listened—I intended no harm! Madame, my mother, is ever urging me to do something for her—to advance her cause. I am a dutiful son and an affectionate brother. Pardieu! monsignor, what can I do? Intercede for me with Louis, and I will furnish all the information you may desire—and I can furnish much, for they have been intriguing with Spain to compass your overthrow.”

There was a flash of triumph in Richelieu’s pale face, but he never removed his glance from Monsieur, who lay now in a miserable heap in his chair.

“It is possible that an arrangement can be made,” monsignor said coldly, opening a parchment and placing it on his desk with a pen beside it; “the king may again pardon your indiscretion if you sign the agreement drawn up some time since. It is simple; in the event of his majesty’s death—which God forbid—you will be cut off from the succession and will have no share in the regency.”

“Pardieu!” cried Gaston, in a burst of temper, rising from his seat and stamping his foot on the floor, “I will not sign it!”

“Ah! you refuse?” remarked the cardinal, looking at him unmoved; “then, your highness, I must lay the evidence in my hands before the council,

and your only hope will be in the king's clemency."

There was a pause, and the two stood looking at each other. Richelieu was as calm and cold as ever, while the prince was white with fury, and terror was growing in his eyes.

"Morableu, you are a devil!" he said, flinging himself into his chair and bursting into tears.

Monsignor looked up at the clock.

"In half an hour," he said, "his majesty's provost-marshal will be here from Paris. It is for your highness to decide whether you will return with him or not."

"You dare not!" cried Monsieur, with a snarl, "you have no warrant."

Richelieu showed him a paper bearing the royal seal.

"This was signed yesterday in the Louvre, M. d'Orléans," he said.

The prince stared at it, his lips parting and his breath coming short.

"I would not have believed it of Louis!" he exclaimed, wringing his hands.

The cardinal said nothing more, but stood looking at the clock. In the pause they heard the trampling of horses' feet in the court.

"Tis the provost-marshal," Richelieu said calmly, "and ten minutes too early."

Monsieur rose to his feet and staggered to the desk, uttering a great oath in his passion of shame and fear.

"Save me, M. le Cardinal," he cried, "I cannot go with the provost-marshal. Mon Dieu! I will sign anything rather than that."

CHAPTER XVIII

MADEMOISELLE'S TRINKET

HALF an hour later, Péron had told the cardinal the whole story of the ride to Poissy and of mademoiselle's signal. He was too straightforward to conceal even that which was to his disadvantage. Richelieu rebuked him sharply.

"I took you for a man of some wit, M. de Calvinsson, or I should not have sent you on such an errand. Had I wanted only a good sword, there are half a hundred at my service as good as yours. But it looks like a fool, sir, to leave a woman to work her will; it might have cost you dear. Happily, you captured the one prize most desired; otherwise" — the cardinal looked fiercely into the young musketeer's eyes, — "otherwise, M. de Calvinsson, you would have gone to the Châtelet."

"The oversight was culpable, monsignor, I admit it," Péron answered proudly, "but it was not a wilful breach of duty; when I betray a trust, I am ready to suffer imprisonment."

"It is well," Richelieu replied coldly, "for you would assuredly meet your deserts. I spare no

man, M. de Calvisson, I favor no man. I am not the first to break off from an engagement, but when it is broken, I will surely punish the offender. It is my purpose to employ you on another and a dangerous mission, and I do not look for failure. Now, mark me, you will take a good horse and go alone to Brussels. In the great square at Brussels, a few yards from the *Maison du Roi*, in the direction of St. Gudule, there is an old house, with a small iron cross over the door. This ring will gain you admittance, and the master of the house will give you a letter for me. You will then return at once with this to Paris, and you will defend the secret with your life. If you give up that message," the cardinal paused, his face was pale and cold, but his eyes burned like fire, "if it is wrung from you, I will have your head, sir, ay, and expose it upon the gibbet by the Pont Neuf where *Maréchal d'Ancre* hung by the heels!"

Péron looked him proudly in the eye.

"Monsignor," he said, "I do not merit your threats nor do I fear them. Were I a traitor, I might both deserve and dread them. As it is, I can but do my duty and no more."

"Do it, *Sieur de Calvisson*, and let no fair face beguile you. Here is the ring;" and the cardinal gave him a small, plain ring with a bishop's miter engraved upon it; "beware of losing that, for it is

a sign which will admit you into the house at Brussels, and would do much mischief in other hands."

Péron took the ring and stood looking at it gravely.

"It is a long way to Brussels, monsignor," he said, "and I go alone; if I fall by the way, there will be none to tell the tale. Do me the justice, therefore, to believe that I will surely fulfil your instructions unless I meet my own destruction."

"Have no fear, your fate will be known to me," Richelieu replied calmly. "One word more, monsieur, there is a lady now in Brussels,—a great lady, mark you,—avoid her. I see you understand me. There is money for the journey; spare no bribes that may be needed; and now begone."

Péron took two steps toward the door and then paused.

"What must I do with my charge, monsignor?" he asked. "Mademoiselle de Nançay and her woman are still in this house."

For the first time Richelieu smiled.

"You need feel no anxiety in regard to them, Sieur de Calvisson," he replied; "I will send mademoiselle to Paris with another escort, who will be equally zealous but not so susceptible to the influence of bright eyes."

Péron saluted, with a flushed face, and withdrew. As he traversed the gallery beyond the cardinal's room, he put the ring into the bosom of his doublet, and, in doing so, touched mademoiselle's trinket and remembered that it was to be returned to her. In the anxiety of Monsieur's capture and the subsequent events, he had forgotten it, and now he hastened to seek its fair owner to restore her property. He was not sorry for this excuse to explain his sudden withdrawal from the little company; he was loath to have her think that the cardinal had replaced him with another for any reason of displeasure. He knew where to find her, and lost no time in asking her permission to speak with her a moment. He sent the message by one of the pages of the household, and in a short time was admitted to the room where mademoiselle sat with her woman. She had laid aside mask and cloak, and looked pale and disturbed, and responded to his salutation coldly; it seemed to him that she had repented of her outburst of frankness in regard to Monsieur.

"Mademoiselle," he said, gravely holding out her watch, "I return your trinket safe. I have been ordered to other duties, and I trust that you will have no further cause for anxiety in regard to it."

She took it with a sudden change of manner,

her face flushing a little as she did so. She held it in her hand, looking at it in silence, and Péron could find no excuse for prolonging his stay.

"I bid you adieu, mademoiselle," he said quietly, "and wish you a safe and pleasant return to Paris."

She did not reply, and he had his hand on the door before she stopped his retreat.

"You go on some other mission, M. de Calvisson," she said, giving him a questioning glance.

"Ay, mademoiselle, on another and longer journey," he replied; and as she said no more, he withdrew.

As he left the cardinal's house to begin his preparations for his hasty journey, he was angry with himself that he should care so much for Mademoiselle de Nançay's moods. He did not yet admit to himself that the fair face of Renée haunted him and was nearer his heart than the cardinal's instructions. She was the daughter of a man who had ruined his father, she was removed from him by a hundred obstacles, yet, with all her ill temper and her pride, she had a greater charm for him than any of the many beauties he had seen since the day of their first meeting at the Château de Nançay; and he had not left the courtyard of Richelieu's house before she gave him yet more cause to think of her. He was

almost at the gate when the woman Ninon came running after him, having pushed her way through the guards at the door. She plucked Péron's cloak with one hand, in the other holding out the trinket he had just returned to her mistress.

"Mademoiselle wishes you to keep this until your return to Paris," she said bluntly; "she says that you will then give it to the clockmaker on the Rue de la Ferronnerie."

Péron's cheek burned; it was evident that to mademoiselle he was only the clockmaker's son.

"Tell your mistress that I might lose it," he said haughtily; "she can readily find a lackey to take it to the clockmaker's shop."

Ninon looked at him angrily, still holding out the watch.

"You are a fool, man!" she said harshly. "Mademoiselle means to help you; 't is a passport that may save your neck at Brussels."

Péron looked at her in astonishment.

"I have the less desire to wear it," he said; "mademoiselle and I do not belong to the same party."

But Ninon was not to be put off.

"I swear to you that there is no harm in the symbol," she said boldly; "mademoiselle is no traitress. Without this, you may meet with many a mischance. Take it or leave it, as you will, but

she will not soon forgive you if you suspect her of evil intentions."

He took it, not without reluctance, but he was not willing to appear afraid of a bauble.

"Tell your mistress that I take it, for her sake," he said, "and I thank her for the thought of me; but it is ever my habit to trust to my sword rather than to tokens for my safety."

"I will take the message," Ninon said, "but look well to the trinket; if you lose it, you may lose your life;" and with that she turned her back on him and returned to her mistress.

More disturbed than ever and greatly perplexed, Péron mounted his horse and returned to Paris to make preparations for his journey and to secure a fresh horse, that he might start before nightfall for the French frontier. The errand, though a perilous one, was not without its charms, and he had no greater responsibility now than his personal safety. How mademoiselle and her woman had divined his destination, he could not imagine. He felt sure that this errand was in some mysterious manner connected with the events of the previous days. The presence of the queen-mother at Brussels and the capture of Monsieur at Poissy, pointed to some relation between the two errands, but all this did not furnish him with a clew to the manner in which Renée de Nançay had divined

his mission. If it was as easily discovered by others, it was likely to be fraught with many dangers; but this only increased his relish for it.

As soon as he had the opportunity to do so unobserved, he examined mademoiselle's trinket with care and curiosity. It was an exceedingly small, almond-shaped watch, dating from the Valois period; the case was of gold and enamel, the face of gold and mother of pearl. but beyond this he saw nothing about it to indicate any secret virtue. It was a pretty bauble, nothing more, and he had seen a dozen such in the shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève and could not imagine its significance; yet he felt sure that it had some meaning which did not show on the surface. Remembering mademoiselle's treatment of him on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre and at Poissy, he could not understand her change of feeling, her apparent willingness to protect him from her father's friends. Yet she had surely sent him this trinket for that purpose, unless the woman, Ninon, had deceived him, which seemed improbable. However, he remembered the bunch of violets at Nançay, and thought it possible that Renée still had her moods. But he had little time now to give to these speculations, for he was under the necessity of hastening his preparations for his expedition; and when he reached

the city he gave his thoughts entirely to this purpose.

He met with few delays; the cardinal's purse being amply supplied, he had no difficulty in equipping himself for the journey, and, before sunset, he had again left Paris and taken the shortest road to Flanders.

CHAPTER XIX

MADAME LA MÈRE

ON the lonely journey to Flanders, Péron had not only time, but food, for reflection. He found himself in a singular position: his father had been deeply wronged and he himself had been made penniless and almost nameless by the machinations of a wicked man; that man was now likely to meet his just reward and leave the way open to the lawful heir, yet Péron found his ambition in that direction choked at birth. To proclaim himself and petition for his property would be to deal a crushing blow to the innocent daughter of his father's enemy. It was true that he was Jehan de Calvisson, the son of one of the *grandees* of France, and she was the child of a man whose ancestors were unknown and who had gained his place by artifice and treachery. But Péron thought of his own humble childhood on the Rue de la Ferronnerie, of his simple training, his long service in monsignor's household with no better friend than his sword, and he felt that to him rank and wealth were of the less value,

unless he achieved them by his own valor, as he had always dreamed that he would. On the other hand, he remembered Renée de Nançay's education in the midst of luxury and adulation, her pride, her probable ambition, her whole life of ease and pleasure among her equals, and he felt that to bring such distress upon her would be cruel and unjust; for was she not innocent? Péron was practically a penniless adventurer, only a musketeer in the service of the cardinal; yet so little was he envious of the wealth and exaltation of others that it gave him a sharp pang to think of dispossessing this young girl of all that she held in esteem. Père Antoine had not labored in vain, when he and the orphan boy spelled out the Psalter together in that upper room, on the Rue de Bethisi; the good priest had sown the seed against this very day, when he foresaw that the outraged son might long to avenge his own and his father's wrongs. It is possible that without the inspiration of Renée's face and voice, Père Antoine might have failed, but certainly his teachings were a salve now to Péron's sore heart. It was true that while she remained Mademoiselle de Nançay, and he the cardinal's musketeer, they were as widely sundered as the poles, yet not more so than they would be if he were the Marquis de Nançay and she the daughter of a per-

jurer and a traitor who had virtually both slain and robbed the late marquis.

What a strange destiny it was that had brought these two together, and put Jehan de Calvisson in the light of an inferior: yet in his present mood he would gladly have saved mademoiselle from humiliation. But behind all this was the reflection that it did not rest with him to save her. M. de Nançay was at the mercy of Richelieu, and few had ever found quarter with that inexorable man. All that Péron could do was to refrain from claiming her name and her estates, if those were spared to her, and to refrain also from appearing as her greatest enemy and despoiler. As he rode along the highways through Normandy and Picardy on to the Flemish frontier, he became more and more convinced that he could not take part against Renée de Nançay, — that he had not the heart to humiliate her innocent pride, to thrust her out as an outcast upon the world, the penniless daughter of a rogue. She had used him with little kindness; yet behind her hauteur and her mockery he had caught glimpses of a genuinely brave and noble-minded woman, and he was himself too noble to bear her ill-will on account of her father. The more his mind dwelt on this decision, the more he was satisfied with it. Yet he thought, with a smile, of the disappoint-

ment of the honest clockmaker, and of the consternation that would overspread the broad brown face of Madame Michel, and the surprise and disgust of the pastry cook Archambault. There was only one face in which he might hope to read approbation of such a course, and that was the gentle and spiritual countenance of Père Antoine, whose own life, far different from those of the worldly priests who everywhere gained preferment and honor, had been one long sacrifice, and who yet believed that insufficient to expiate his one sin, an unrequited love for the beautiful Marquise de Nançay, the mother of Jehan. That was the simple story of Père Antoine's life, not without its pathos and its beauty, and full of that long pain which brings forth not only faith but works.

Contrary to Péron's own anticipations and to those of the cardinal, he accomplished his journey without delay or mishap. Apparently, his departure from Paris had been unnoticed and his errand unsuspected, for no one followed, neither was he stopped by the way, and he reached his destination as speedily as his good horse could cover the long distance between that city and the old Flemish town.

It was in the early evening, and the glow of sunset was still in the western sky, when Péron en-

tered the gates of Brussels and rode slowly through the streets. He had never seen the place before, and the long rows of dark, Spanish-looking houses interested him, the people on doorsteps and balconies diverted him, and he let his horse keep his own gait as he went. When he had halted to have his passports examined at the entrance to the town, he had asked and received directions to the market-place, from whence he thought he could find his own way. He met with no difficulty in obtaining information; he had picked up a little Spanish in the household of the cardinal, and it stood him in good stead. Unconsciously, too, he was attracting a good deal of attention; his handsome face and figure did not pass unnoticed even in his plain dress, which he had purposely adapted to that of a poor gentleman travelling upon some private errand.

With occasional assistance from persons on the street, Péron found himself approaching the Cathedral Church of St. Gudule, where the bleeding body of Count Hoorne was carried after his execution. Thinking of the fate of the two Flemish princes, and remembering his own father's, Péron was so absorbed in looking up at the old cathedral that he scarcely noticed a man standing in the shadow of the parvis, until he was

accosted by the stranger, who spoke in good French.

"You have the time, monsieur?" he asked, approaching Péron.

Without pausing to reflect, Péron drew out mademoiselle's watch and opened it.

"It is six o'clock," he said, "but I am from France."

"From Paris?" remarked the other. "Ah, I see that I was not mistaken. Well, comrade, you are late; I was sure of you, but I did not like to speak until I saw the trinket. Let us lose no more time; follow me."

Péron was taken by surprise; evidently he was expected, but why had the cardinal neglected to tell him that some one would watch for him? Yet was this the man he sought? Then the truth flashed upon him: it was the trinket, mademoiselle's watch. At last he seemed on the point of learning its secret. He was too fond of adventure, too reckless of personal danger, to hesitate. Without a word, he dismounted and, leading his horse, followed the man, who seemed disposed to be as silent as he. They walked at a brisk pace, but Péron had time to examine his guide, who was undoubtedly a Frenchman. The stranger wore a suit of black velvet, with a cloak and sword and a low Spanish hat. There was nothing remarkable,

however, in his swarthy face or his general appearance. He made his way quietly across the great square, where the cardinal had located the house with the iron cross, and Péron, though interested in his guide and his unknown errand, did not forget to look for it. He had no difficulty in locating the *Maison du Roi* or the *Brodhuys*, which stood conspicuously enough in the market-place; but it was not to the house of the iron cross but beyond the square and down a long and narrow street that the stranger led the young soldier. They passed through a crowd in the market-place, and there were people in the street beyond, which perhaps accounted for the silence of the guide, who walked a few paces in advance. The lane they had entered—it was little more than a lane—was a *cul-de-sac*, and at the end was a large square house; but it was the rear of this house which opened on the lane, the front faced on another street. The stranger made straight for this mansion, and, seeing that it was their destination, Péron examined it curiously. It was singularly bald of interest, a square Dutch house with no crossing with the Spanish architecture. There was a row of windows on the second story, and a door in the middle of the first, while the tiers of windows here were shuttered. In one casement above, in the middle of the house, Péron saw a

light burning. As they approached, a little boy, dressed plainly as a page, came out of the door and took the bridle of the traveller's horse, as if he was expected. Still much amazed, but full of a daring curiosity, Péron followed the man in black velvet through the doorway and across a square hall to the stairs. It was gloomy in the house in spite of the tapers set in brackets on either side of the hall, and the fire in the great chimney smoked dismally when the door was opened. On the stairs they met another man, wearing the dress of a servant.

"You were long returning, monsieur," he remarked, addressing Péron's guide.

"He was late," was the reply; "the roads from Paris grow longer every day."

The servant laughed and stared curiously at Péron as he stood aside to let them pass. At the head of the stairs the stranger stopped and hesitated.

"You ought to have had time to arrange your dress," he remarked, with a dubious glance at Péron; "but you were late and she is always impatient. Well, well, we cannot stop now; if you bring good news, doubtless your boots will be forgiven."

Péron made no reply; he was afraid that a mistake might destroy his chance of fathoming

mademoiselle's mystery. Fortunately the other did not wait for an answer, he crossed the hall and lifted a heavy curtain of black velvet; as he did so, a flood of light shone into the hall and for the moment dazzled Péron, who however heard him say, elevating his voice, —

“Madame, the messenger from Paris.”

They were standing on the threshold of a moderately large room, handsomely furnished and lighted by many tapers. As he spoke, there was a rustle, and a woman rose from a chair by the fire and stood looking eagerly toward the door. She was tall and fat, with a dark skin and round, staring eyes, her expression at once vapid and forbidding. She was dressed in black, and wore her clothes with such ill-grace that she appeared even larger than nature had made her. Péron did not need a second glance; he was rudely awakened from his idle spirit of adventure, for he had no difficulty in recognizing the person whom he least wished to see, Marie de' Medici, the queen-mother of France.

He saluted her mechanically, but remained standing awkwardly at the threshold. In his confusion he did not forget, however, to be thankful that he bore no papers or anything to betray his errand but the cardinal's ring, and that he had concealed in the lining of his coat. His silence

and manifest embarrassment seemed to surprise not only his guide but the queen. She was the first to speak.

"What ails the man, Guyon?" she demanded with impatience; "is he from my son or from M. d'Épernon?"

Guyon looked sharply at the supposed messenger.

"Why do you stand like a fool?" he asked him in an undertone; "give her majesty the packet."

Péron bowed profoundly. "Madame," he said, "some mistake has been made; I am not the bearer of any message from Paris. I came to Brussels on my own business."

The queen retreated a few steps, an expression of dismay on her face.

"How came you here then, monsieur?" she asked haughtily; "this is an unwarrantable intrusion! Guyon, what is the meaning of this?"

Her equerry was staring at Péron with an agitated face.

"I swear to you, madame, that he bears the token!" he cried in an excited tone.

"How is this, monsieur?" the queen said angrily, addressing Péron; "you deny your identity, but you bear the token?"

He understood mademoiselle's trinket now, and

for the moment wished it many leagues beneath the sea.

"I regret the intrusion, madame," he replied calmly, "but I have not consciously worn any token which would lead to such an error."

There was a pause, and both Marie de' Medici and her attendant regarded him in surprise and perplexity. It was evident that neither of them knew what to do next. If he spoke the truth, they were in an awkward situation; if he was deceiving them, playing them false, their position was still more perilous. Péron understood their thoughts, and knew that his only chance of escape was immediate action.

"Madame," he said, turning again to the queen and speaking courteously, "having made the mistake, — which I was led to do through this gentleman here, who seemed to recognize and expect me, — my best apology will be to withdraw at once;" and making her an obeisance, he withdrew so quickly that Guyon had no time to intercept him.

No sooner had the curtain fallen behind him, however, than he heard them engage in an altercation, but he did not pause to listen. He went swiftly across the hall and began to descend the stairs. As he did so, there was the sound of the opening of the street door, accompanied by some

talk as if of fresh arrivals, and in a moment a party of gentlemen came to the foot of the staircase. Péron saw that he must meet them, and he quickened his steps in the hope of passing for a messenger hurrying upon his errand. They came crowding up the steps, three of them, all booted and spurred as if fresh from the saddle, and he divined that it was the expected message from Paris. They met midway on the stairs, and all three stared rudely at Péron, and he recognized, in a flash, the painted, foppish face of the youngest. It was the dandy of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, *Sieur de Vesson*. He stared as if unable to believe his senses, and stopped on the stairs with an oath, but Péron passed on rapidly and reached the street unmolested. It was not the time or the place for a quarrel, and he breathed more freely when he saw the lad still holding his horse.

"You did not tell me what to do," the child said in an aggrieved tone, "and I did not know whether to take him to the stables here or not."

Péron threw him some coins and sprang into the saddle, only too eager to be safely out of reach of the queen-mother. As he rode out of the street, he looked back and saw that two men had come out of the house bareheaded and were

standing there looking after him. Evidently, he had got off in the nick of time, and they had intended to detain him.

With a lighter heart he made his way to the market-place and, finding the *Maison du Roi* once more, began his search for the house with the iron cross, a search made difficult by the darkness of nightfall. He rode twice up and down on that side of the square, not caring to risk an inquiry; the third time he found it, having passed it twice before in the gloom. The house answered the cardinal's description: it was ancient-looking and Spanish in type, and below the balcony above the front door was a small black iron cross set in the stone. Doubtless it had been the property of a good Papist in the days of Alva; it might have been the one from which he witnessed the executions of Egmont and Hoorne. Ah, if houses might only tell their own stories!

Péron dismounted and knocked gently at the door of this forbidding dwelling, but he had to repeat the summons before it was opened by a tall, thin man wearing the black habit of a priest. He carried a taper in his hand, the flame flaring in the draught from the door and showing a white face with large dark eyes. He looked askance at his visitor until Péron held out his hand on which he had placed the cardinal's ring. The priest

recognized it at once, and opened the door wide enough to admit the traveller.

"Enter, my son," he said, "and I will have your horse cared for; it is late and you will have to spend the night."

Péron entered accordingly, and the priest fastened and bolted the door, after having first despatched a half-grown lad to take care of the horse.

CHAPTER XX

PÈRE MATTHIEU

HAVING secured the strong door of the house of the iron cross, the priest lighted Péron through the hall and up the narrow stairs to the second floor, where, in a front room, a table was laid for supper. It was a bare, gloomy place, illuminated by only one taper until the priest set the one he carried beside the other on the table. By the window was a young man dressed like a clerk, who rose respectfully as they entered. After setting down his light, the elder man turned and scanned Péron's face and figure closely; he seemed to be satisfied with his inspection, for his own expression relaxed.

"So you are the cardinal's messenger?" he said, "a younger man than I looked for; but monsignor makes few mistakes. I am Père Matthieu, and this is my clerk, Paschal Luce. We expected you and have laid a place for you at the table; therefore put aside your cloak and sit down, for I have ever found that a soldier is less ready for business with an empty stomach,

and from your looks, monsieur, I take you for a soldier."

"I have been one of the cardinal's musketeers ever since I was old enough to bear arms," Péron replied, "but I have seen less of service in the field than I should have liked."

"There is time enough for that," Père Matthieu said grimly; "France is like to need every strong arm she has to defend her, and that, too, more against her secret foes than her open enemies. When a queen of France is willing to plot with Spain to gratify her own malice, it is time that every Frenchman looked to his sword."

"That charge has been made openly against both queens in Paris," Péron remarked.

"Ay, and with truth," retorted the priest, "could we have wrung the evidence from the man Laporte; but Mademoiselle d'Hautefort was too quick for even monsignor. But we have enough here in Brussels; the queen-mother has never resigned herself to obscurity."

"I saw her but now," Péron said.

Père Matthieu started and gave him a searching look.

"You saw the queen-mother?" he repeated sharply, "where and wherefore?"

Péron smiled at the priest's quick attitude of suspicion.

"By accident only, *mon père*," he said, and went on to relate briefly the story of the meeting near St. Gudule and the subsequent events.

"It was Guyon," said Paschal Luce; "I have seen him twenty times, pacing up and down in the parvis of the cathedral, but I never divined his errand; hereafter, I will watch him."

The priest had listened in silence, his face grave and thoughtful.

"You will have trouble," he said to Péron; "it was ill timed and reckless to follow the man. Queen Marie de' Medici is the center of a troublesome and dangerous hive, and she is plotting with Monsieur and with Spain to overthrow the cardinal and to gain control of the king and his affairs. The way is long from here to Paris, and these fellows may yet do you a serious mischief. You have taken your own life in your hand, and unhappily I cannot devise any means to protect you. You must get out of Brussels before sunrise tomorrow; it may be that they have not yet located you, and they will not expect you to leave so soon."

"For my personal safety, I am not so concerned," Péron replied calmly; "while I have a sword and pistol, I can at least make a fair fight; but I am sorry to have imperilled the safety of any packet I may bear."

"I must find a way to fashion your message in such form that it can be easily disposed of," the priest said; "and then you must trust rather to the speed of your horse than the strength of your sword. There are spots enough between here and St. Denis where a man might be made away with and no one be the wiser. Like enough, too, the men who came after you into that house were from Paris and have been at your heels all the time. When you have finished your supper, Paschal, go out and see if the house is watched."

Péron's face flushed. "At least I may do that much to amend my own carelessness," he said.

"Nay, you will go to sleep," Père Matthieu said sharply; "you will need to be in the saddle early, and you have a stretch before you which requires fresh strength and steady nerves. Moreover, Paschal understands this work, and you are not built for it," he added, with a smile, measuring Péron's strong figure and frank face; "you are a better musketeer than a diplomat, monsieur."

"I confess that I have no taste for intrigue," Péron replied, with a shrug.

"Nor I," said the priest dryly, "yet without it more heads would be broken. I see you have finished your supper, it is well; there is a taper, and in the room beyond you will find a bed.

Take what rest you can, for you must leave at daybreak to-morrow to elude pursuit."

"But my instructions," Péron said; "had I not better receive them to-night?"

The priest shook his head. "Nay," he replied, "you will remember them better in the morning, and they are simple. It is my work to-night to prepare the message in a shape that may escape detection."

Thus summarily dismissed, Péron had no excuse to remain, and obeyed the priest's directions. The bed in the next room was a mere pallet of the hardest sort; but the traveller was weary, and he was not sorry to stretch himself upon it. In spite of his anxieties and the prospect of a dangerous journey on the morrow, he soon sank into a sound sleep, disturbed only by confused dreams of the trinket and Renée de Nançay.

He was awakened before dawn by Paschal Luce, who stood by his bed holding a taper in his hand.

"Wake up, sir musketeer!" he said brusquely, "you lie like a log. A man could rap you over the head without risk for his pains. It is time you were up and dressed; your horse is saddled and your breakfast is waiting."

Péron rose hastily and began to put on his clothing while Paschal was speaking.

"Is the house watched?" he asked eagerly.

The clerk shook his head. "Nay," he replied, "not that I can discover; yet I cannot believe we shall elude them, for I think they have long been suspicious of this house."

"Do you go with me?" Péron asked, noticing the pronoun.

"Only a league beyond the gates," the other rejoined; "then I return over our tracks to see if I can discover aught of interest."

By this time Péron was ready, and the two went into the next room, where he speedily despatched the breakfast that had been prepared for him. He had scarcely finished when Père Matthieu came in.

"Paschal," he said, "go down and bring your mule and the horse to the back door; you must start immediately." Then as the clerk left the room, he turned to Péron: "Here, sir, is this pellet which, I charge you, guard with your life."

Péron looked in amazement at a tiny ball of silver which the priest held out to him; it was scarcely larger than a filbert and looked like a solid ball of metal. Seeing his amazement, Père Matthieu smiled.

"That trinket holds a message for monsignor," he said quietly; "it has been cunningly devised for just such an emergency. Take it and carry it as the most precious thing you have except your own soul; conceal it from all, and if the hour

come when you are close pressed, put it in your mouth before you fight."

"And if I find that I shall be overpowered," said Péron, taking the silver pellet and looking at it strangely, "what then?"

"Swallow it," said the priest, sternly, "if it choke you to death."

"In that case they could cut it from my throat."

Père Matthieu shrugged his shoulders. "'T would be better so than that they took it while you were alive," he returned grimly. "It is enough to tell you that it contains the evidence of secret dealings with Spain, the number of men that the French traitors ask to destroy their own country, and it will materially aid monsignor in his efforts to destroy these plots."

Père Matthieu did not add that the message really contained evidence against Cinq Mars, "the king's rattle," as the cardinal called the grand equerry. It was the beginning of that plot which brought M. le Grand to the block and involved Monsieur once more in an effort to bring the Spaniards into France.

Péron asked no more questions, but rose and buckled on his sword and pistols and partially concealed his hallicrèt with his cloak.

"Which way did you come?" asked the priest, as they descended the stairs.

"By the way of Laon and Namur," Péron replied.

"Then return by Arras and Amiens," said Père Matthieu; "'t is better to turn out of the way a little than to fall into a trap."

At the rear door, they found Paschal Luce already mounted on a stout mule and holding Péron's horse. The priest shook hands with the young musketeer and gave him his benediction.

"God speed you, my son," he said less grimly than usual; "your life is in His keeping."

With these words still ringing in his ears Péron sprang into the saddle and followed Paschal through the byways and lanes of Brussels to the gates, in the gray light of dawn. At that hour, the city was quiet enough: no one was abroad save those who, having no home, had slept in the doorways and in vacant porches all night, and arose now and walked, shivering in their rags, and having no hope of better comfort until the sun arose. These wretched creatures, whom the rich passed indifferently when they went to early mass, were the first upon whom God's light shone every day, but the last to whom man's benefits extended. As Péron passed, he threw some money among them, not that he had it to lavish, but his heart was tender, and the stony face of poverty appeals most sharply to those who have known trouble

themselves ; and his life had had its trials. The gates were not yet opened, but Paschal Luce found means to overcome this difficulty ; after some parley in the guardhouse he came out triumphant, and the two rode out of the city together. So far all was well ; they had no cause to suppose that they were followed, and they proceeded along the highroad at a brisk gait with lighter hearts. Three leagues out from the town, Luce bade Péron farewell and returned to report to Père Matthieu.

Left to himself, with a clear road behind and with the hope that all was well in front, Péron continued his journey with some satisfaction. He had reached Brussels in safety, and accomplished his mission ; he had now only to return with equal good fortune and expedition to Paris, and he seemed in a fair way to do so. He had examined girth and saddle well before starting, his weapons were in good condition, his horse a fine one, and there appeared to be no reason for him to fail. The sun rose and dispelled the gloom in the woods by the wayside, and the scene was at once cheerful and encouraging. Spring was coming ; already the green turf showed on the hillocks, and the trees were budding on every side. As the day advanced, he began to pass parties of merchants and other travellers bound for Brussels, as well as peasants carrying in provender for the city. But

no one appeared to excite either alarm or suspicion ; he made good progress before night, and his tired horse compelled him to make a halt. His journey continued almost monotonously uneventful to Arras, where he was delayed six hours by a heavy storm, and afterwards he found the travel more difficult on account of the bad roads.

As he drew nearer Paris, his thoughts again recurred to M. de Nançay. What had been his fate? Knowing monsignor, he could imagine but one result, and fell to musing over the probable consequences to mademoiselle. Thus his thoughts turned on one pivot, and his natural abhorrence of Pilâtre de Nançay was modified by pity for his daughter. As to his own future, he could make no plans except that he was unwilling to make his elevation to rank and fortune the cause of another's misery.

It was not until he was approaching the Somme that he saw anything to arouse his suspicions, and then he thought he observed a party of travellers in advance who acted strangely. However, he lost sight of them at the ford of Blanche-Tache, and he went on to Amiens without again discovering them. He arrived at the town just at sundown and had some difficulty in reaching the gates before they were closed. Once in the city, Péron looked about sharply for his travellers, but saw

none resembling them. The place was crowded with visitors, and he reflected that not only could they elude him but he could also avoid them. So, with more assurance, he rode to an inn, the *Rose Couronnée*, recommended by Paschal Luce; and there he found accommodation, although the landlord at first protested that every apartment was filled and it would cost a crown to sleep upon a table in the public room. At last, however, he found a bed for the new arrival and sent his horse to the stables, whither Péron followed to see that the beast received proper care.

CHAPTER XXI

THE INN AT AMIENS

WHEN Péron returned from his errand to the stables, he found the public room of the inn full to overflowing. There was a fair at the horse-market, and it had crowded all the hostelries, chiefly with country folk and traders from both sides of the Somme; but there were also other guests, and some of distinction; and it was even whispered that M. de Bouillon was there, in the private apartments above. This caused no little undercurrent of gossip, for it was suspected that there was some plotting between this duke and the queen-mother, in which Monsieur was concerned. And this was really true; for a little while afterwards when M. de Bouillon was sent by the king to take command of the Italian army, he was drawn into the plot of Monsieur and Cinq Mars, and pledged the town of Sedan — of which he was prince-sovereign — as a refuge for the plotters in case of defeat. More than once in the talk, Péron's attentive ear caught the name of M. le Grand, to his surprise, for he believed — with

many others—that “the king’s rattle” was also the cardinal’s tool. The idle talk increased the young soldier’s uneasiness, and he ate his supper with small appetite, thinking of M. de Bouillon and his party overhead and wondering how directly their presence might concern him. Meanwhile, the rattle of crockery, the jingle of glasses, and occasional snatches of song filled the place with an almost deafening noise and commotion. Every table was crowded and even the window-sills were doing service, and Péron found himself squeezed in at the lower end of a long table, between two men,—the one on the left a horse-dealer, and the one on the right wearing the habit of a clerk of the Sorbonne. Both repelled the young musketeer, the horse-dealer by his loud and half-intoxicated talk, the clerk by his evil expression, having across his nose an ugly scar which seemed to belie his calling. However, he was a civil, smooth-spoken man, and Péron could find no excuse for turning his back upon him, as his first impulse prompted. He began to talk as soon as Péron was seated, opening his remarks by a reference to the storm and the delays caused by the heavy roads. The musketeer replied shortly and with indifference; however, this did not discourage the clerk, who continued to converse in low tones, not always audible amidst the bustle and noise of the place.

"You are going south, I presume," he remarked cheerfully, in spite of his neighbor's coolness.

"In that direction, yes," Péron retorted curtly, applying himself to his supper with the intention of escaping so soon as it was despatched.

"To Paris, perhaps?" inquired the persistent stranger.

"Probably to Paris," replied Péron.

"In that case, we may ride together," remarked the clerk. "I go to Sorbonne and shall be glad of company; in these unsettled times the roads are not always safe for a solitary traveller, and you are, I take it, a soldier by profession."

Péron had registered a mental vow that the scarred clerk would not ride with him, but he thought it best to dissemble.

"You live in Paris, sir?" he inquired, more courteously.

"Yes, since I have entered the Sorbonne," the other replied; "and you?"

"I go there on private business," Péron said.

"We will ride together," said the stranger. "I proposed starting early on the morrow, but I am not in haste, and I can make my time suit your inclination."

Péron took a moment for thought.

"I shall not leave until noon," he rejoined; "I am a stranger in Amiens, and I can occupy

the morning with profit in looking about the town."

"Permit me to be your guide," said the clerk, courteously; "I was born here in Amiens—though I left it twenty years ago. My name is Guerin Neff."

Peron bowed gravely, but made no response. At the same moment he received a nudge from the elbow of the tipsy horse-dealer, who had been strangely quiet for the last few minutes.

"His name is Guerin Neff," mumbled this worthy, thickly, "but look you, comrade, he is the biggest rogue in Amiens, ay, on this side the Somme."

In the confusion, the clerk did not catch the low-toned remark, although he cast a suspicious glance at the horse-dealer, and Péron smiled. Of the two, he felt more confidence in the drunkard; but happily, having finished his meal he rose from the table, hoping thus to escape both. However, he could not so easily shake off Neff, who followed him across the crowded room to ask at what hour he would go out in the morning. Inclined to believe the warning of the horse-dealer, and deeply annoyed at the man's persistence, Péron was tempted to cut short the matter, and hesitated only because of the extreme necessity for caution. If anything lay behind the

stranger's pursuit of him, it was wisest to dupe him with a semblance of complaisance; and so, much against his natural inclination, Péron replied with courtesy, appointing an hour later than the time at which he secretly intended to leave Amiens. This agreement seemed to satisfy the stranger, but he still followed the musketeer out into the hall. Opposite the public room were two smaller ones, and through the open door of the first could be seen a group of travellers playing cards at a table in the center and surrounded by a curious assemblage. Hoping to shake off his troublesome acquaintance, Péron entered this apartment and stood a moment on the edge of the circle, looking on. Four men sat at the table deeply engaged in the game, all dressed fashionably and like persons of wealth. Two looked like many of the young men who usually dangled about the court, the other two were masked. The black masks with only the round holes for the eyes and covering all the face but the chin, presented a strange appearance in the light of the tapers on the table, and gave a certain mysterious interest to the game, especially as these two were partners. They were all unusually silent, and their manner had its effect upon the spectators; these looked on eagerly, for the contest was keen and the stakes high, but

they forbore to interrupt the solemn decorum of the game. There was something fascinating in the masks and the profound stillness, while the jewelled hands of the four players moved with such wonderful celerity and skill. Péron became interested at once in spite of himself, and drew nearer to the table, followed by the officious clerk, who stood close at his side, looking on with interest apparently as keen as any of the others. Not a word was said; there was no sound but the light clip of the cards, except the noise which came from the dining-room across the hall. The two masks were winning, winning heavily, and the other two played desperately, as losing men will. Suddenly there was a change of luck, one of the losers began to win, and his opponents bore the reverse with less equanimity. The taller of the masks flung down his card, the knave of clubs, with an oath. As he did so, Péron's watchful eyes caught the superscription, and he started. A statute of Henri III. had laid down the law that all master-cardmakers should thereafter inscribe their names, surnames, signs, and devices on the knave of clubs; a statute unrepealed by Louis XIII. But on this knave of clubs Péron saw the single word "Sedan," and he could not fail to attach a peculiar significance to it; for it was the name of the stronghold of M. de Bouillon, whom men

believed to be involved both with Monsieur and the queen-mother against the cardinal. Whether there was or was not a secret meaning to this game of cards, Péron could not decide; but he needed no second warning; he determined to withdraw quietly from this dangerous vicinity. However, this resolution was more easily made than executed. In his first interest in the game, he had unconsciously drawn nearer to the table and stood in the front row of spectators; now he turned to retreat, but as he did so the tallest mask sprang to his feet and seized him by one arm, just as Guerin Neff grasped the other. Péron was powerful, and he put out his full strength to shake them off, but in vain; each held him with a grip of iron.

"Unhand me, villains!" he exclaimed, in impatient fury.

This sudden onset upon a quiet observer of the game so surprised the other spectators that they fell back in open-mouthed amazement. However, the matter could not pass unexplained, and the tall stranger removed his mask, disclosing the handsome face of a man of middle age whose looks and bearing were all in his favor. He had used his left hand to undo his mask, but he was at once compelled to use both to hold the angry young soldier, who shouted aloud for assistance.

"Help me to escape these villains!" he cried, appealing to the amazed onlookers, who, however, did not budge, after the manner of people who will not singe their own fingers for another.

"Gentlemen," said the card-player who had removed his mask, "this is my son — my poor, mad son who escaped from his keepers a fortnight since and —"

"You lie!" said Péron, fiercely, struggling so furiously that his two captors had to be reinforced by the other two players; "'t is a trick to seize and rob an innocent man. I never saw your face before!"

The other looked gravely concerned and shook his head with a melancholy air.

"He is ever thus in his paroxysms," he said mournfully; "he is apparently sane, gentlemen, but fearfully and cunningly mad."

"You are a villain, and had I my sword free I would thrust the lie down your throat," said Péron. "I appeal to the inn-keeper, who saw me come here sane; I appeal to these men, who have seen me stand here quiet and sober. 'T is a lie so monstrous that it is only absurd! No fool will believe you!"

But unhappily, though he said this aloud and stoutly, Péron saw that a doubt of his sanity was growing in the faces around him; he saw the first

expressions of incredulity and amazement giving way to that terror which the ignorant and the timorous have of madness. He was held tightly by his captors, though he had ceased his struggles, fearing to increase their dread of his insanity; but he saw the circle widening as they drew away, as if he had some pestilence, and he saw, too, the triumph growing in the faces of the men who held him, and most of all in the eyes of him who still wore the mask. At this moment the head of the tavern-keeper appeared in the door, drawn by Péron's outcry and the reports of some strange occurrence. These reports had attracted the curious and the idle, who were already filling both doors and windows. Péron appealed at once to his host.

"You know me," he cried angrily; "you dealt with me, and know me to be sane. Call the watch and make these knaves unhand me, or I will make you pay dearly for this wild jest."

But the tavern-keeper did not move, he only stared blankly at the tall man who had claimed Péron as his son. That personage spoke again with sad dignity of manner.

"You know me, M. Felix," he said to the host, "and therefore you can understand how much I lament my poor, afflicted son's vagaries."

"Surely I know you, M. de Vesson," the

inn-keeper replied obsequiously, "but had I not best send for a doctor for the unhappy young gentleman?"

"I thank you, no," replied the other, gravely; "but I pray your aid to bind this poor boy in a litter that we may convey him safely home. In these frenzies, he sometimes breaks out and commits murder: he has slain five of his keepers."

At this, the spectators fell back yet farther, and there seemed little hope of a rescue. Péron knew now his peril; this was a Vesson, not the painted fop of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, but doubtless one of the same family. He saw, too, that his captors were believed and that he was already an object of pity and disgust. He made one more appeal: struggles were useless, it was four to one, and Guerin Neff had already stripped off his weapons.

"I appeal to any honest man in this room," Péron said, as calmly as he could. "I am a sane man; my name is Jehan de Calvisson; I have never seen any of these men before. They are conspirators, and they determined to seize me for some reason, — what I know not. A hundred crowns to any man who will go to a magistrate and get me assistance. A hundred crowns, I say, and more, for these rogues mean to murder me!"

His words were met with open incredulity: the

very liberality of his offer laid it open to suspicion. Madness — how they feared it. *Mon Dieu!* let loose a madman? Never! M. de Vesson saw that he had won; he bowed his head gravely, looking mournfully at Péron, while his companions pinioned the young man's arms behind his back and bound his ankles together, in spite of his renewed struggles and shouts for help.

"Alas!" M. de Vesson said, with evident grief, "he is at his worst, my poor, poor boy! Gentlemen, this scene wrings a father's heart."

The hall was crowded now, and the courtyard without, and men climbed on each other's shoulders for the morbid pleasure of beholding the lunatic; but no one stirred a finger to aid Péron. He was indeed almost mad over the hopelessness of his situation. At first, he had not dreamed that such a ruse could succeed, but, to his amazement, it worked like a charm. In the crowded hostelry it furnished a much needed excitement; it was more interesting than M. de Bouillon or Cinq Mars. Once convinced of the captive's insanity, they began to recollect how strangely he had acted; one horseboy recounted his morbid visit to the stable, another had heard him say the *Pater Noster* backwards over his horse's head. One of the servants, too, declared that he ate like a crazy man and stared wildly at his knife. Stories flew

from mouth to mouth, and that indifference to a stranger's fate, so common and so cruel, kept the doubtful from giving the prisoner the benefit of their doubts. No one offered either aid or comfort; and to his surprise and indignation Péron found himself bound between two of M. de Vesson's retainers and thrust into a litter, while the whole party of cardplayers mounted their horses. In half an hour after the first warning, when the knave of clubs was thrown, they were all riding down the streets of Amiens with the supposed lunatic in their litter and a curious throng at their heels. Péron hoped that they would be compelled to stay in town until sunrise, but he was mistaken. At the guardhouse, where the party halted, Péron again raised an outcry for help, and again he was defeated by M. de Vesson's plausible explanation of his son's incurable malady; and after some parley the gates were opened, and they rode out into the night, leaving the curious rabble from the Rose Couronnée behind, and with it their captive's last hope of deliverance.

CHAPTER XXII

A GREENWOOD TRIBUNAL

PÉRON'S captors rode about three leagues beyond Amiens, on the road to Beauvais, before they halted and loosed his bonds a trifle, that he might lie more easily in the litter, while his two guards rode at the sides of it, watching it too closely for any chance of rescue or escape. Meanwhile, he lay quite still, endeavoring to collect his thoughts and prepare himself to meet his possible fate. The thought that a mistake might have been made did not enter his mind; he was positive that these men had either followed him from Brussels or lain in wait for his return. What they intended to do with him he could only conjecture; what they wanted of him was sufficiently clear. That they did not purpose to treat him with cruelty seemed apparent by the loosening of his most uncomfortable bonds, which were relaxed more than they intended, for after some industrious efforts, Péron succeeded in freeing his left hand, and immediately took the silver ball, containing the cardinal's message, from his bosom and held it

ready to put into his mouth. He had no hope of being able to defend himself or his charge, but he could at least follow Père Matthieu's directions. He knew that they had not searched him because that was impracticable in the darkness, and they had not dared to do it at the inn at Amiens; but he had no doubt that the search would be thorough when daylight came. Meanwhile they believed him secure and were content to let that operation await their leisure. He now devoted himself to endeavoring to liberate his other hand or his feet, but here he was destined to disappointment; they had done their work well, and even with one arm partially free he could not succeed in breaking another bond or reaching another knot, and he was without a knife to cut the thongs. Weary at last with his exertions, he resigned himself to his fate, and waited quietly but watchfully for the moment when he must hold the cardinal's pellet in his mouth. His reflections during the hours that ensued were of the gloomiest, yet he had no reason to blame himself, for no man could have foreseen the strange artifice which had ensnared him. Nevertheless he cursed the advice of Paschal Luce which had led him to the Rose Couronnée, however innocently it had been given. The more he dwelt upon his situation, the less possibility there seemed of escape, and he could only hope to defeat

their purpose and keep the secret missive from them.

They halted upon the road after some hours, and rested until morning, taking turns in watching the litter; but Péron could not close his eyes, for he was compelled to be prepared for any emergency and to defend his trust. Never did a night drag more slowly, for he was convinced that they only waited for light to examine their prisoner here, in the forest, where there was less danger of interruption. And he was right, as the event proved; for at dawn his captors were up and stirring, some of the men preparing breakfast over a fire of fagots, while M. de Vesson and his friends held a brief conference and then ordered the prisoner from his litter. Guerin Neff — no longer wearing the habit of a clerk, but in his proper character as a ruffianly soldier — and another man succeeded in dragging Péron before this tribunal. When they first approached the litter, he had thrust the silver ball of Père Matthieu into his mouth and this made speech impossible, so he decided to play the rôle of sullen endurance, refusing either to speak or move at the order of his captors, a part which they seemed to regard as only natural and not worth their consideration. The two worthies brought him before M. de Vesson and the two cardplayers

of the inn. With them was the younger Vesson, the fop of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, and Péron at once concluded that he had been the other mask, which accounted for the gleam of triumph in his eyes, the gratified malice of a small nature. The four men stood on a little mound under a beech-tree away from the high road, and surrounded by their followers, numbering in all fifteen stout soldiers. Péron, bound as he was, stood small chance of escape, but he understood that a man of M. de Vesson's rank and character intended no lawless violence if he could accomplish his ends without it. He saw now that the two Vessons were father and son, for there was a marked likeness, although the elder man had a face of far more force and nobility. The four noblemen wore the rich dresses suited to their condition, and were in strange contrast to their bound and dishevelled captive, although Péron measured them with a glance of proud contempt. There was a significant silence for a few moments after the arrival of the prisoner and his guards, and then the elder Vesson, who seemed to be not only the senior but the leader of the party, spoke, addressing Péron in a tone of haughty command.

"Young man," he said, "you are known to be a spy and a go-between for one you wot of. If

you will make a full confession of the whole matter and give up any papers or information which you have, without further delay, you need fear no personal injury; but if you continue your stubborn resistance, you must take the consequences."

He paused, waiting for the prisoner's reply; but Péron, by force, was silent, and he assumed an air of sullen obstinacy to suit his speechlessness. The cavaliers around M. de Vesson were manifestly impatient and dissatisfied because any leniency was shown, and that nobleman's son interrupted the pause.

"He is a stubborn devil as well as a braggart and a bully," he remarked scornfully, the recollections of Péron's treatment of him having left a sting that rankled. "You will get nothing from him unless you break his neck."

Convinced that Péron did not intend to make terms by any act of treachery, the elder Vesson made a sign to his guards.

"Search him, Guerin," he said sharply, "and be thorough, for we deal with one as cunning as a fox in his devices to obtain messages with impunity."

The two soldiers did not need his injunctions, and they did their work so thoroughly that Péron feared that they would even find the cardinal's ring in its hiding-place in the lining of his coat,

but they did not; and more to their astonishment there were no papers, not a scrap of writing on his person. They searched his stockings and his boots, but in vain, and the noblemen looked on in evident disgust.

"He carries the message in his mind," remarked M. de Vesson, in a tone of sharp disappointment.

"Then it is best to make short work of his head and the message as well," replied one of the others, fiercely.

"Perhaps he can be bought," suggested another, in an undertone.

Vesson shook his head. "Nay," he rejoined in the same low voice, "trust monsignor for knowing his man; and that young fellow is not made of the stuff which is easily corrupted."

"He claimed to be a Calvisson," said the younger Vesson; "did you hear him at the inn?"

"I did not heed him," returned his father, and then added, after a sharp look at Péron: "Pardieu! Can it be possible? I see a likeness now — the likeness that has troubled me since I first saw the fellow. Can it be? — after all these years?"

This conversation was held apart, but Péron saw the change in their looks and gestures and marvelled at it. Meanwhile, Neff had made a curious discovery which caused him to stare open-mouthed from the prisoner to his own superiors.

"M. de Vesson, I have found the token on his person!" he cried, holding up Renée's watch in evident amazement.

There was an exclamation of surprise from all the others except M. de Vesson, who received the statement calmly.

"Yes," he said, "I remember; it was the token that led to the error at St. Gudule."

This speech was all that was needed to convince Péron that these men were the same he had met in the house of Marie de' Medici, and he kept his lips resolutely closed although Père Matthieu's ball pressed hard into his tongue.

There was another low-voiced consultation between the leaders, the three younger evidently urging a course of which M. de Vesson did not approve, and after some dispute he prevailed.

"To horse!" he said. "A day's journey without breakfast may do much to moderate this fellow's obstinacy. Forward therefore, gentlemen, without delay."

Following his instructions, they resumed their journey, Péron again penned in his litter, like a sick woman, and not allowed speech with any one. Thus they rode through Beauvais, without halting, and took the way to St. Denis with all speed. At midday they halted to eat and to bait their horses, and then it was that Péron was surprised by the

actions of Guerin Neff. Since the discovery of mademoiselle's watch the fellow had shown a certain awe and respect for his captive, and now when he alone was on guard, he took the opportunity to thrust the trinket into Péron's hand.

"Take it," he said gruffly. "I know not how you came by it, but I will not meddle with it. I have seen more than one honest man lose his head for meddling with the business of Madame la Mère; I will none of it."

Péron took the trinket without reply; he had the cardinal's message again in his mouth and could not speak, if he would, and Neff interpreted his silence as a mere continuance of his sullen mood.

After that, the prisoner was left undisturbed; only once was any food thrust into the litter, and that also was given by Guerin Neff. It was a weary journey, but Péron had cause to congratulate himself on his success: no one as yet even suspected the cause of his persistent silence, and but for the discomfort of the device, it seemed an easy and simple means of duping the enemy. All things come to an end, however, and he could not avoid some dreary speculations upon the probable termination of his adventure. Shut in as he was, he could not discover their road or where they intended to go, except that the general direction

was toward Paris ; and he was aware that they finally crossed the Seine not far from Rouen, which showed that they had quitted the road to St. Denis, taking a more westerly course. He had nothing to expect but imprisonment or death. He reflected that they were not likely to let him escape to bear the tidings of his capture to Cardinal Richelieu, and to give him the information which they had failed to take from him. Cramped with his bonds, and weary from need of sleep which he dared not take, he lay, at last, indifferent to fate and merely awaiting the end.

It was night when the party finally halted before a château, and after a brief delay Péron was roused from his despair by hearing the others dismount and seeing the flare of torches about his litter. Evidently they had reached their destination, and he rallied his drooping energy to meet the climax. After some time he was taken from the litter and unbound. He shook himself with almost the joy of an animal at feeling his limbs free, and looked about him. They were in a courtyard at the rear of a large house, and the place was quite lively and noisy from the sudden arrival of so large a party. Two torches served to partially dispel the gloom, and he saw that there were several grooms and hostlers running about among the horses and that the light streamed out from the open door of the

château. Before he could observe more he was taken by his two guardians and led up the steps into the house. Here were the others, M. de Vesson, his son, and his friends, standing in a group in the center of the hall, talking to a young and beautiful woman, whose brilliant dress showed in the light of many tapers. Péron caught his breath; to his amazement he recognized the proud face and golden hair of Renée de Nançay. In a moment he understood the détour around St. Denis; they had come to Nançay, being relatives and fellow-conspirators of the marquis. After the first shock of surprise Péron fixed his eyes on mademoiselle, wondering what would be the outcome of the strange trick of destiny which made him now virtually her prisoner. But Renée made no sign; she was no longer the defiant girl of the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, or the plucky little conspirator who had defied him at the house of the Image de Notre Dame. She was the haughty demoiselle, the great lady of the château; she looked at him without recognition, with cold hauteur and indifference. He heard her reply to M. de Vesson's request for some place to bestow the prisoner.

"Certainly, monsieur," she said in a clear voice, without another glance at the young musketeer; "the cell in the west wing, near the north tower,

is the strongest; my steward will direct your men where to bestow him according to your pleasure."

Her back was toward Péron now, nor did she turn her head when he was led away to go through long halls and down two flights of stairs and to be locked at last a prisoner in a cell in his father's house. Thus he was securely locked and bolted in the narrow room and left to reflect upon the strange trick of fate which made him a captive where he should have ruled as master.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DUNGEON OF THE CHÂTEAU

THE room in which the prisoner was confined was a small one in the cellar of the Château de Nançay, and was strong enough to resist his greatest efforts to effect an escape. That had been his first thought, and, as soon as the bolts were shot and his guards departed, he devoted himself to an exhaustive but unprofitable examination of the place. He was provided with a rushlight, and was thus enabled to make his observations with comparative ease. However, a few moments sufficed to convince him that it was fruitless to look for a possible means of egress. There was but one door, that by which he had entered, and which was sufficiently secure to resist twenty men as well as one, unprovided as he was with any lever to force the bolts and bars; and the only window, situated too high for him to look out of, was two feet long by ten inches in height and barred. Through it an occasional gust of night air chilled the room and made the rushlight flicker. He noticed with some surprise — and strange thoughts

of mademoiselle's charity — that there was only a bench in the cell, and that too short and narrow for a man to lie on. If he slept to-night it must be on the floor; and he was already almost overcome with physical exhaustion from his unremitting watchfulness. A pitcher of water and a bowl of soup had been put upon the bench, and he ate the pottage with good appetite, for his fast had been almost unbroken since he left Amiens. He experienced a sensation of relief, at escaping the vigilance which had tormented him, and being secure of a few hours in which to rest without holding that hard ball between the roof of his mouth and his tongue. He wasted no further time in speculations as to the morrow; he ate his food and drank from his pitcher of water, and then, having hidden Père Matthieu's message as securely as he could in his clothing, he made a pillow of his cloak and stretched himself on the hard stone floor with a sigh of comfort. There is no sleep sweeter than that which comes to the weary, and he had earned a right to unbroken slumber. However, unconsciousness did not come so quickly as he had expected; he lay for a long while thinking of Mademoiselle de Nançay's manifest indifference to his fate, and the ease with which she consigned a political enemy to a comfortless dungeon. He could not reconcile this apparent cruelty with

the kindness that had given him a token which, in all probability, had saved his life. He was visited, too, by other thoughts and with the recollection of Madame Michel's description of the manner in which he had been saved, when a helpless infant, from his father's enemy. He thought, too, of his visit, when a boy, to the château with Jacques des Horloges, of his prayer in his dead mother's room, of Renée and her bunch of violets on the terrace. As he lay there on the dungeon floor he fancied that he could hear the bell of the great jacquemart, which Michel regulated, ringing for eleven o'clock, and from that his mind went back to the chimes in the little shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie and of his childhood and M. de Turenne. At this his thoughts trailed off into unconsciousness, and the exhausted musketeer slept the sleep of the tired and the innocent.

He did not know how long he had slumbered, but it seemed scarcely an hour, when he was awakened by the opening of the door of his cell. The bolts were rusty, and they slipped back with a grating sound which roused him at once. His rushlight had gone out, but the persons who opened his door bore a taper which served to reveal them to his startled eyes. He had expected Guerin Neff or one of the retainers of Nançay, but instead of these he saw two women:

one, short and thick, held the taper which shone in her face — it was Ninon; the other, smaller and slighter, he recognized with surprise as Renée de Nançay. At the first sound he had started to his feet, and he stood now regarding them in much perplexity, but without uneasiness in regard to his trust; of two women he had no need to be afraid. Mademoiselle's treatment of him in the hall had been such that he gravely waited for her to speak. They came in, however, without a word, and closed the door behind them; then he saw that Renée held a sword and a pistol in her hands as well as a mask. All these things she laid upon the bench before she spoke. She was evidently surprised at her reception, and her face flushed deeply as she turned to address him.

"Sieur de Calvisson," she said haughtily, "yonder are weapons and a mask: assume them and prepare to follow Ninon, who will let you out of the château. I would have you know, monsieur, that it was no petty spirit of revenge which made me send you to this comfortless den. I chose it because, forsooth, I could the more easily release you."

"Mademoiselle, you but increase my gratitude," Péron replied, in a low voice. "Your trinket saved me, as I believe, upon the road, and now you are my liberator; your justice to the mes-

senger will doubtless have its weight with monsignor."

She turned upon him with sparkling eyes.

"Monsieur," she said proudly, "I do not care a jot for M. le Cardinal; I would not move my finger to serve him or his cause, but no man shall suffer wrong in the Château de Nançay while Renée is mistress here. I pray you take your weapons and begone, for I cannot promise protection should my relatives overtake you in your flight."

"Mademoiselle, I thank you for the warning; but with my sword and pistol in the open I trust to shift for myself," he replied, not without feeling; but he obeyed her, knowing himself to be an unwelcome guest.

She watched him in silence while he assumed the weapons and his cloak and mask, and something in the expression of his face softened her mood. When he was ready she signed to Ninon to open the door, and then she turned for her last words to him.

"Ninon will guide you, monsieur," she said, not unkindly, "and you will find your own horse, saddled and bridled, by the wall on the highroad. They brought it from Amiens, the better to carry out the farce they acted at the Rose Couronnée. One of my own trusted grooms holds the horse

now against your coming. Mount him and make good speed to Paris, for at morning they will be looking for you. That is all — except, monsieur, beware of the Golden Pigeon at Poissy; some of the party may be there to-night."

She lighted her taper at Ninon's and started as if to leave them; but, before she could prevent it, Péron knelt on one knee at her feet and kissed her hand.

"Mademoiselle de Nançay," he said softly, "believe that I am not ungrateful — or ignorant of the risk you take to aid me."

"Monsieur," she replied, and for the first time her voice faltered, "I have done nothing but that which my father's honor demanded."

She spoke with dignity; but Péron saw the tears shining in her dark eyes, and moved by an impulse he pressed her hand to his lips again as he rose to his feet. She drew it away with a deep blush.

"Go, monsieur," she said shortly; "there is not a moment to lose, it is nearly two o'clock." And with these words she left them.

Ninon lost no time in fulfilling her mistress' instructions. She signed to Péron to follow her, and in silence they went through the winding labyrinth of the cellars until they came to a postern, which she opened cautiously; after look-

ing out to see if all was quiet, she extinguished her taper and led the way into the rose garden of the château. The night was intensely dark, and Péron stumbled more than once in making his way among the thorny bushes; but at last they came to a terrace, and descending it found themselves by a low stone wall. As they reached this spot Péron heard a horse neigh and Ninon paused.

"Climb the wall, monsieur," she said curtly, "and on the other side is your horse. — Adieu!"

She left him without waiting to listen to his thanks; and he did not linger, but vaulting over the low wall found his horse held by a groom, as Renée had said. In the darkness he could not see the man's features, but he was expected.

"From Mademoiselle de Nançay?" asked the servant.

Péron replied in the affirmative and in a moment more was in the saddle, a free man again with his sword by his side. He took one last look at the dark outlines of the château, in which one light shone from the western tower, and then he set his face toward Paris, with a lighter heart than he had carried in his bosom since he left Brussels.

He made good progress, although he had to make a detour at Poissy to avoid the Golden

Pigeon, and he did not halt until he reached Ruel, where he stopped only long enough to ascertain that the cardinal was in Paris. The ride was uneventful; and it was evident that mademoiselle had deluded his captors, for there were no signs of pursuit, and he rode down the Rue St. Honoré at last, with the message from Brussels safe in his bosom.

He did not pause even to arrange his disordered dress, but went at once to Richelieu to discharge his trust. The cardinal listened to his account with a grim smile.

"You erred in following — from idle motives — the stranger at St. Gudule," he said calmly; "from that probably arose your troubles, which were a just and legitimate retribution. Otherwise you have done well and deserve well at my hands. You have to-day placed in my hands evidence that will convict the enemies of the state, that will open the eyes of the king to the peril in which we have stood, and show him whom he can trust. M. de Calvisson, there are two ways for a man to die: in doing his duty, or for betraying it — always choose the former."

Two hours later Péron had again assumed the scarlet uniform of the cardinal's musketeers and was making his way to the shop at the sign of Ste. Geneviève with a light heart, having successfully

executed his commission and conscious that he stood well with Richelieu, who was ever chary of his praise, though quick to censure neglect and unforgiving of disobedience.

It was the fête of St. Barnabas, and the shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie was empty when Péron entered it, but at the sound of his footsteps Jacques des Horloges came out of the inner room followed by Madame Michel. In both their honest, kindly faces Péron read disappointment and surprise as they saw him in his old uniform; these simple folk longed to hail him by his proper title, to see him in his father's place, and they could not understand what seemed to them his lack of ambition. However, they greeted him with their accustomed cordiality and affection, and the shop being vacant, the three sat down amid the tall clocks and the short clocks, which stood in the same close tiers as in the days of Péron's childhood; and as the cat, a gray one too, came out from behind the jacquemart and rubbed himself against them, it seemed to the musketeer that the years had not been, and that he was still the clockmaker's adopted child, with his speculations about the mysterious attic and his legends of the many clocks; and his eyes rested dreamily on the cross-shaped watch of M. de Guise. He was not permitted to enjoy this revery; for they had a

hundred questions to ask, and he strove to answer them to their satisfaction, for his heart was warm with grateful affection for this faithful couple. They heard all that he felt at liberty to tell them of his journey, — its perils and its happy termination. Madame listened between tears and smiles, clasping her hands and murmuring an occasional thanksgiving as she heard of his narrow escape. Jacques was differently affected. He had been reared a soldier, and the account of such adventures stirred his blood; there was a gleam in his eye, a tightening of the lips that told, more plainly than words, how he wished he had been there to strike a good blow at the opportune moment. The scene in the old shop was full of homely interest, the beautiful and quaint clocks forming a picturesque setting for the three figures, — the stalwart clockmaker leaning on the counter, his gray head a little bent as he listened, Madame Michel sitting in a low chair, her hands clasped and her broad, brown face illumined with affection and amazement under the white wings of her wide cap, and opposite the graceful figure in its scarlet uniform and the handsome face of the musketeer, who held the gray cat on his knee absently caressing it as he talked. When he told of mademoiselle's trinket, Jacques immediately showed a new interest and asked to see it; he held

it a moment in his hand, looking at it attentively, and then he smiled.

"I know this watch well," he said; "I made it myself."

"I thought I knew something of watches," Péron remarked, "and I took that for one of the Valois period."

"That shows my skill," replied the clockmaker, in an amused tone. "It is a copy of a Valois watch belonging to the queen-mother. I made twenty of these, though I only dimly divined their purpose, and all have this secret spring." As he spoke he pressed the side of the watch and it opened to reveal a miniature. With a smile he held it out to Péron, "You know its secret virtue now," he said.

The miniature, though exceedingly small, was an excellent representation of the Italian features and round eyes of Marie de' Medici.

"I should never have made this discovery," Péron said, "nor do I think that Guérin Neff opened it."

"There was no need," rejoined Jacques, pointing to the cover; "they all bear that tiny fleur-de-lis upon them, and are all of exactly the same size and shape."

The trinket had to be handed to Madame Michel to examine, and while she was marvelling at her

husband's skill, he went on to speak of other things.

"M. de Vesson is a half-brother of Pilâtre de Nançay," he said, "and like enough to be up to the elbows in the same business. 'Tis strange that monsignor let that rogue go."

"What rogue?" asked Péron quickly.

Both Jacques and his wife looked up in surprise.

"Did you not know that M. de Nançay had been set at liberty?" asked the clockmaker. "I saw him yesterday on the Rue St. Martin with an escort of gay gentlemen. There was much gossip, so says Archambault, about the arrest and the release; 'tis thought that monsignor but baits his trap for larger game."

Péron was silent, perplexed and uneasy at this turn of events. It was impossible, however, for any man to probe the cardinal's purposes; it was not unusual for him to let a victim apparently escape from his toils for the sole purpose of more deeply involving him. It might be so with M. de Nançay; it had been so with Chalais; but Péron could not understand, and it presented matters in a new light: it bore directly on his own future.

"I cannot forgive him for letting the rascal go," Madame Michel remarked, breaking in on the thread of his meditations; "if a man ever deserved to lose his head it is Pilâtre de Marsou,

sometimes called Marquis de Nançay. Mère de Dieu! I wonder that his flesh does not creep at the name, for verily 't was he who murdered your father and would have murdered you. Ah, I have not forgotten that night in the woods, and how I prayed and wept with the poor fatherless baby in my arms. I know that the bon Dieu will reward him according to his merits. I recollect how I said over and over the words of the psalm: 'Qu'une ruine imprévue accable mon ennemi; qu'il le prenne au piège qu'il a dressé lui-même, et qu'il tombe dans les embûches qu'il m'a préparées.' And I believe that it will be so, for even • Père Antoine, who is an angel of forgiveness, says that retribution comes surely upon the wicked — either at seedtime or harvest."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CARDINAL'S RING

IN the Rue des Bons Enfants, behind the gardens of the Palais Cardinal, Péron had his lodgings. He had long since outgrown the proportions of his little room over the clockmaker's shop; the old house at the sign of Ste. Geneviève was too small to accommodate the three grown people and the apprentices, and he had taken up his quarters near the scene of his daily employment. He had two upper rooms in a house but a little way from the rear of Archambault's pastry shop; his means were limited and his requirements few and simple, so the apartments were plainly and neatly furnished. He had left the little room on the Rue de la Ferronnerie untouched; it was to him full of tender recollections of his childhood, and he knew it was dear to the motherly heart of good Madame Michel, who looked upon him almost as her own son.

It was in these rooms on the Rue des Bons Enfants that he made a discovery which amazed

and alarmed him. He had been twenty-four hours in Paris before he recollected the cardinal's ring, which he had hidden in the lining of his coat, and when he went to look for it, to his surprise, it was not to be found. He remembered that it had escaped the vigilance of M. de Vesson's searchers, and he could not account for the loss. In his anxiety, he cut the lining entirely away from his coat, but revealed nothing. It was dusk when he made this discovery of his mishap, and he lighted a taper and kneeled on the floor, searching with patience and exhaustive scrutiny every corner and crevice of the room. The furniture was scanty, and the light shone into the most remote spots, but showed nothing. He was convinced that the ring was in the coat when he took it off to assume his uniform, nor could it get out of its own accord. He had dressed hastily to attend the cardinal to mass at his parish church of St. Nicholas des Champs, and in his hurry he had forgotten the ring. No one had entered the rooms in his absence, for the doors were both secure and the keys in his pocket. Then he recollected the windows. There were three; the two in the front room overlooked the street and were inaccessible, but the one in the inner room opened within three feet of the slanting roof of the adjoining house, which, however, appeared

to be unoccupied. If any one had entered his rooms, it must have been through that window, but he saw no signs of it. It was possible for a man to walk along on the roofs of the other buildings and come down on the roof opposite his quarters, but why should any one suspect him of carrying the ring, and know where to find it? If the men of Vesson's party had seen it, they surely would not have hesitated to take it. What had become of the circlet? It could not effect its own escape, that was certain, and he could not imagine that it had fallen from its place, so securely had he fastened it. Moreover, he was not alone confronted with anxiety at the loss; he was liable to be called upon to produce it at any moment by Richelieu, who had for the time overlooked it, but who never forgot. His ceaseless vigilance noted all things, small and great, with the same untiring energy and patience. It was with profound anxiety, therefore, that Péron continued his search, and it was only when he was absolutely certain of its fruitlessness that he ceased to look in every possible spot where the precious ring could have been mislaid. At last, he was compelled to go on duty again to attend the cardinal to the Louvre, whither he went like a man in a dream. He was too full of his own perplexities to observe the gay scenes in the gal-

eries of the palace, where M. le Grand was at the height of his power and arrogance, unconscious that Richelieu's web was already about him. Père Matthieu had sent from Brussels evidence of M. le Grand's correspondence with the Vicomte de Fontrailles, who had already been selected as the messenger that the conspirators were to send to Madrid to conclude a treaty in the name of Monsieur. For Péron had aided in the first steps to expose the plot of Cinq Mars, which was already partially woven. In the Louvre, too, Péron came face to face with his old patron, the Prince de Condé, who greeted him kindly, recalling with a smile the victory over Choin in the tennis court and saying that monsignor had spoken highly of the musketeer's courage and address. The prince's condescension and his mention of the cardinal's commendation suggested to Péron the possibility that his real station in life was already known among a few, and that M. de Nançay's strange liberation had some secret meaning. But all these thoughts did not allay his anxiety over his loss, which might be attended with such serious results, the bearer of that ring being able to gain easy access to the house of the iron cross, and perhaps to fool even Père Matthieu. Yet a vision rising before him of the stern-faced, keen-eyed priest afforded

him some reassurance, for it would be difficult indeed to outwit him.

It was midnight when Péron was at last at liberty to return to his lodgings. He was weary and abstracted, and made his way through the gardens of the Palais Cardinal to the Rue des Bons Enfants. At his own door he found a little ragged boy of the street sitting on the stone step, and thought the child had selected this spot to sleep; but at his approach the small figure rose. It was too dark for either one of them to distinguish the features of the other, and only the lantern which hung above the door revealed the ragged outline of the boy. He peered through the darkness at Péron as he came up.

"Are you M. de Calvisson?" he asked.

"I am," replied Péron, surprised at the recognition. "What do you want of me at this hour, child?"

"I have a letter for you," he replied, thrusting a note into Péron's hands and turning away at once.

"Not so fast," exclaimed the musketeer, intending to detain the messenger; but the boy was fleet of foot and had fled away in the darkness, without pausing to hear what Péron had to say.

Annoyed and amused by the little vagabond's manner of delivering missives, Péron had no re-

source but to enter the house and get a light by which he could read the letter so strangely sent to him. The contents startled him more than the manner in which he had received it. The writing was delicate, like that of a woman, and he recognized the seal. The note was brief and to the point; it ran:—

“M. DE CALVISSON, — If you will meet the writer at the stone bridge by the Cours la Reine, you will receive the ring which was lately stolen from you. If you come not by nine o'clock on Thursday morning, you will lose the opportunity forever — and the ring. R. DE N.”

The seal and the initials were those of Renée de Nançay; yet Péron was not only perplexed, but doubtful. He had never seen mademoiselle's writing, but something in the letter raised his doubts; he suspected a trap. This was Tuesday; he had therefore one day in which to endeavor to fathom this mystery, and he resolved to use it. Of one thing he was no longer uncertain: the ring had been stolen. As it was already past midnight and he could accomplish nothing for the next few hours, he wisely spent those in an effort to rest; but he slept little, for now, in addition to his anxiety in regard to the cardinal's ring, was the fresh perplexity of the note, which might and might not be from mademoiselle.

Péron did not misunderstand her; he knew that what she did was prompted rather by her disgust at the treachery that she saw about her than from any kindness toward him, though once or twice he had thought that with all her hauteur Renée was not wholly indifferent to his fate. He knew that in her eyes there was a great gulf fixed between them, which not even her love or his could span. Mademoiselle, the daughter of a marquis, one of the grand demoiselles of France, could scarcely afford to lose her heart to the cardinal's musketeer. Péron, conscious of his own noble birth, watched the young girl's proud defiance with a pang at the thought that the revelation of his rank would but widen the breach. As for the note, the appointment at the lonely spot was unlike a woman. On one side of the Cours la Reine, the road to the king's hunting-lodge at Versailles divided it from the Seine; on the other were ditches which ran between the promenade and a barren plain; and across these ditches was, at one place, a small stone bridge. A spot more lonely at that hour of the morning could scarcely be found, and it seemed wholly unsuited to a visit from a young woman, yet it had the one advantage of being isolated and little visited by those who would be likely to recognize Mademoiselle de Nançay. Whichever way Péron regarded

the matter, he found it perplexing, but he never thought of failing to keep the trust. There was no risk save to himself, and he was not one to hesitate because of personal danger. It lent a zest to every adventure, and he would have lamented its absence.

He devoted some time the following day to a fruitless endeavor to probe the mystery. It was of course impossible to discover the bearer of the letter, and he found it equally difficult to obtain any other information beyond the bare fact that Mademoiselle de Nançay had been in Paris the previous day, at her father's house on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre. This lent a color of possibility to the incident. Further than this, Péron was unable to push his investigations, and at nightfall on Wednesday he knew as little as ever, but he had fully determined to go to the stone bridge on the following morning, taking only the precaution to wear his hallegcrèt and to go well armed and prepared for any emergency.

He supped with Madame Michel at the clock-maker's shop, — a custom to which he always adhered unless on duty at the Palais Cardinal, — but he returned early to his rooms on the Rue des Bons Enfants. He had kept a persistent watch there since the loss of the ring, having some fancies about the window, which he still

suspected as the way by which his quarters had been entered. It was after nightfall, and he had lighted his tapers and sat down at his table to read; for Père Antoine's early training had cultivated his taste for books. It was while he was thus quietly engaged that he became aware of light footsteps on the stairs outside his door, and the rustle of a woman's garments. He stopped in surprise and listened, his eyes upon the door. In a moment he heard a whispered consultation, and then something brushed against the panels. He said nothing, waiting to see the sequel or to hear it. Presently there was a timid knock, followed by the low murmur of voices. He waited no longer, for his curiosity was fully roused, and undoing the latch he threw open the door, revealing two cloaked and masked women on the other side. Without hesitation, the smaller of the two entered the room, followed by the other, and signed to him to close the door. He did so in surprise and bewilderment, and was not sure of his recognition until Mademoiselle de Nançay removed her mask. She was very pale, but her eyes sparkled with excitement and resolution, and she scarcely heeded Péron's salutation.

"M. de Calvisson," she said, with quiet dignity of manner, "you must think it strange indeed for me to come here—and in this manner

— but I learned only an hour since of the snare that had been set for you; that my name had been used for a cruel deception, and I could not rest until I set it right. Monsieur, you received a note purporting to come from me and summoning you to keep a tryst at the stone bridge by the Cours la Reine. That letter was a tissue of falsehood."

Péron bowed gravely. "Mademoiselle," he said quietly, "I never believed that the letter was yours, but I should have kept the appointment."

"Mon Dieu!" she cried with sudden emotion, "you would have kept it to your death — and I should have been the means of it!"

She pressed her hands before her face, shaken by an emotion too deep to conceal. Péron watched her with a strange confusion of feeling, his heart beating high with sudden hope.

"Mademoiselle," he said, too low for any ears but hers, "if my death would cause you regret, it would be robbed of much bitterness."

She looked at him with startled eyes, a beautiful blush mounting to her fair hair, and then she drew back haughtily.

"I came here from a sense of duty, monsieur," she murmured in a strange voice. "I could do no less — I know not what you think of me!"

"That you are an angel, mademoiselle," he

replied, "too noble and too just to let a man's life be sacrificed by the use of your name."

She gave him a questioning glance, as though she doubted the sincerity of his words and feared that he misunderstood her motives. Her pride was up in arms and she put on her mask, securing it with trembling fingers.

"There is no more to tell, monsieur," she said coldly; "if you go to the Cours la Reine, you will meet your death — and I did not write that letter — that is all. Come, Ninon, we must away."

Péron could not delay her, but he picked up his sword.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "permit me at least to attend you through the streets."

She halted at the door, confused; her woman had gone out upon the stairs, and the two stood face to face.

"You cannot go, monsieur," she said, with a falter in her voice; "your attendance upon me would lead to worse trouble for you — and for me!"

"If it touches you, mademoiselle, I will not stir," he replied; "otherwise, I pray you not to deny me the small privilege of attending one who has thrice saved my life."

"It would be my peril, Sieur de Calvisson," she said softly. "Adieu!"

She hesitated on the threshold, her mask hiding her face; then she held out her hand and he took it in both his.

"Mademoiselle," he said, very low, "I would cheerfully give my life to defend yours, and the time may come when I pray you to remember that I will accept no benefit which shall be to your detriment."

He thought he saw surprise in her eyes; but he pressed her hand to his lips, and in a moment she was gone and he heard her light footfall on the stairs. Flushed with emotion, and with a hundred conflicting thoughts, he moved to the window to watch her leave the house; but as he saw her come out on the step below, he heard some one in the hall, and looking up, saw Ninon on the threshold.

"Mademoiselle dropped her handkerchief, I think," she said, pretending to search upon the floor.

Péron took the taper from the table to aid her, and the two stooping down to look beneath the table came very near together. It was then that the woman found her opportunity.

"Be wary, monsieur," she whispered, giving up the pretended search; "they know who you are — and I do, though mademoiselle does not — and they mean mischief."

In a flash the truth burst upon him, the Nançay faction knew whose son he was.

"Ninon," he said earnestly, "I pray you not to tell mademoiselle!"

She was at the door again, and she gave him a strange look.

"Do not be a fool, monsieur," she said with blunt kindness; "mademoiselle has been betrothed to M. de Bièvre for a twelvemonth; and her father—ah, M. le Marquis is a devil!"

With these words Ninon hurried from the room and ran down the stairs after her mistress, leaving Péron standing in the middle of the room, like a man turned to stone.

CHAPTER XXV

ARCHAMBAULT'S INFORMATION

NINON'S announcement, coming with unexpected force and with truthfulness, dashed Péron's new-born hopes to the ground. Mademoiselle's flashes of tenderness and emotion were but the whims of a coquette, who found amusement and flattery even in the admiration of an inferior. The Renée that he knew, with her varying moods of anger and disdain interspersed with glimpses of soft-heartedness, was doubtless very different from the fiancée of M. de Bièvre. Péron tried to recall what he knew of the man, a cousin, he thought, of the Prince de Condé, and a man of some wealth and pretensions, — not an unsuitable match for mademoiselle in family and rank, but by repute a brainless young courtier and something of a roué. Yet, after all, that was Renée's affair, not Péron's. He thought that he had seen him once or twice at the Palais Cardinal or the Louvre, and that he bore a strong likeness in dress and manner to the younger de Vesson. Doubtless she was

accustomed to men of this stamp and preferred them to a soldier of fortune — a musketeer.

In the half-hour after mademoiselle left, Péron had these thoughts and many others more bitter, and called himself a fool many times for having yielded to the charm of a fair face and two bright eyes. He had known from the first of a barrier between them that should be impassable, yet he had let a tenderness grow in his heart, and deserved punishment for his folly. So completely did mademoiselle's betrothal fill his mind that he forgot the cardinal's ring, forgot his surroundings, the taper burning low on the table, forgot the unbolted door, until he heard a step on the stairs and rose to fasten his latch. He was too late; before he reached it the door was opened softly and the round face of the pastry cook was thrust into the space. Seeing that Péron was alone, Archambault came in, and shutting the door behind him with his shoulder, advanced to the table, where he set down a large frosted cake with an air of satisfaction.

"Pardieu!" he said, rubbing his hands, "I had to have an errand, and I brought you one of the cakes that you used to love. You would run all the way from the Rue de la Ferronnerie for one of these when you were eight years old; ay, when you were a big boy of fourteen and with

M. de Condé, you had still an affection for my cakes."

"I thank you, Archambault, not only for the present but for the old times," Péron replied smiling, though he wondered what had brought the fat pastry-cook up all those steps for so flippant an errand.

"You are welcome enough, M. Jehan," Archambault said; "but give me a chair, I am marvelously short of breath of late, and I hurried, having something of weight to say."

When he was seated he clasped his fat little hands on his knee and waited placidly while his host lighted another taper and closed the shutters on the street. When Péron sat down at last, his guest was smiling and complacent, the same round little man who for forty years had catered for and flattered the wealthy coterie of the Marais, and was one of the most famous cooks of Paris. It was said, in the next reign, that Vatel learned his trade from him, as he had learned it of Zamet. His dress was far richer than the young nobleman's. Péron wore the uniform of monsignor's guards; the cook wore a suit of black velvet with ruffles of Flemish lace, a chain of gold around his neck, buckles that were gemmed with jewels at his knees and on his shoes. He cast a glance not unseasoned with pity at the bare room.

"Mon Dieu!" he said, "what a place for a marquis."

The exclamation was so genuine and involuntary that Péron laughed outright.

"My tastes are more simple than yours, Archambault," he said.

The pastry cook shrugged his shoulders.

"It makes my heart ache, M. Jehan," he replied heartily, "for I remember who you are and what is your due. But 't is the vulgar who gain nowadays; monsignor has no love for the grantees. However, that is not here nor there; I came for another matter. You have lost a ring?"

Péron looked at him in amazement.

"By St. Denis!" he said, "there is witchcraft in it. Yes, I have lost a ring. What more?"

Archambault looked at him placidly, his round eyes showing neither amazement nor curiosity.

"The ring is in the hands of M. de Nançay," he said calmly.

Péron rose from his chair with a sharp exclamation.

"I fear I am ruined!" he cried; "tell me all you know, Archambault."

The pastry cook rubbed his hands together with a certain unctuous enjoyment of the situation.

"They were at my shop," he said, with a deliberation that tormented his auditor; "M. de Nan-

çay, M. de Vesson, and another, a relative, I take it, of M. de Bouillon. They had a private room, and—" he stopped, looking a little abashed under Péron's searching eyes. "Well, monsieur," he went on with a shrug, "what would you? I have found it useful to keep an eye on my guests; I have known many things. In that same room I heard the challenge discussed of the famous duel on the Place Royale, for which M. de Boutville and M. de Chapelles suffered,—monsieur's example to enforce his edict. I—"

"Ciel, Archambault, go on!" cried Péron in despair.

"I am going on," the pastry cook replied aggrieved. "I have a peep-hole—un œil-de-bœuf—concealed in the partition, you understand, M. Jehan, and there I overheard the story of the cardinal's ring. They sent a man into your rooms here through some window—" the narrator stopped again to look for it—"Ah, bah! do you not see that roof? He found the ring in your coat and they have it. There is mischief brewing; they would ruin you with the cardinal,—for I think they suspect your identity,—and they would ruin the cardinal's schemes. They start to-morrow with that ring for Brussels; doubtless you know more of what they can do with it than I do."

He stopped, gazing at Péron eager for enlighten-

ment, but he received none. His host was on his feet in a moment looking at sword and pistols and gathering some necessities together. Archambault looked on in aggrieved amazement; he had that natural love for gossip that belongs to his class and character.

"What will you do, M. Jehan?" he asked blankly.

"If they go to Brussels to-morrow I go to-night," Péron replied decisively; "and look you, Archambault, I will give you a letter to Père Antoine, he must go for me to monsignor; I cannot lose an hour, nay, not a minute."

"You cannot go alone!" Archambault cried, with agitation. "Mère de Dieu! there will be four or six of them—you are mad."

"So much the better—one can more easily outstrip four or six in a race for Flanders," Péron replied, changing his uniform for a dark suit and a hallegcrèt, while he talked.

"Ah, I see, you would be first in Brussels," Archambault exclaimed; "but it will not do—one man cannot outwit them."

He fell into meditation, sitting cross-legged on the high wooden stool; with all his flippancy and selfish greed, the pastry cook had still something of manhood left, and no little wit of a low order but keen enough to serve his ends.

"I have it," he said, looking up and waving his hands. "Choin is at my place, a little tipsy, I believe, but in the morning he will be on his feet. The great hulk was asleep on the kitchen floor, and but for my haste to come here I would have had him thrown into monsignor's gardens to cool; but, parbleu! he is the very man."

"The man, if sober," Péron replied, smiling, "but drunk—he is as useless as the figures on Maître Jacques's great jacquemart!"

"He will be sober in the morning, and so will Matthieu and Jeannot," said the pastry cook; "by your leave, therefore, M. Jehan, I will send them after you post-haste."

"A useless trouble, good Archambault," Péron replied, picking up his cloak and sword, being now fully equipped for his journey; "they would scarcely overtake me, and would doubtless get into a drunken brawl by the way."

The cook shook his head. "Nay," he said, "I have noticed that Choin does not drink when he has work; you used him before, and you may use him again. I can send him at daybreak, for I will set my fellows to work upon him with cold water enough to drown the fires out of his brain and belly."

Péron was not untouched by the honest man's anxiety.

"I thank you, friend," he said, shaking the other's hand, "but it is useless; I can make shift with a good horse to outstrip these plotters on the road, and I am off at once. There is the letter for Père Antoine; and for the cake — why, keep it against my return."

"Which road do you take, M. Jehan?" persisted the pastry cook, as they went down the narrow stairs together.

"By the way of Amiens, though I shall avoid the town," Péron replied; "but I shall cross the Somme at the Blanche Tache."

No more was said; Péron believed that he had discouraged the cook's well-meant scheme, and hastened to the stables for his horse, knowing well that every hour counted and that he must reach Brussels before the conspirators, or all would be lost. The stable-boys were asleep and he saddled and bridled his own horse, thinking once or twice that he heard something stir in the straw in the next stall, but putting it down to the credit of the rats.

It had been an eventful evening; at nightfall mademoiselle came to warn him, later Archambault told his story, and at midnight he was riding along the Rue St. Denis on his way to Flanders. His future, and perhaps his life, depended upon the four feet of his horse and his own wit. In

spite of the stirring occurrences of the last few weeks, in spite of his disappointment at the tidings of mademoiselle's betrothal, he was calm and alert as he went out on his dangerous and uncertain errand. He not only wished to save his own honor, but he believed that there was peril to France in the plotting of these conspirators. He knew that on a little thing hangs sometimes the fate of an empire, and he understood something of the web that the cardinal was ever weaving with the patience and the skill of a spider. Yet with all these reflections, with the weight of this anxiety upon him, he longed greatly to settle an account with M. de Bièvre, and the face of mademoiselle haunted him. He thought with a smile, however, of the party waiting with fruitless patience at the stone bridge of the Cours la Reine.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE FOREST OF CHANTILLY

IT was one o'clock when Péron rode through St. Denis, and a light spring rain was falling; through the mist he saw the blurred lights of the guardhouse and he heard the tolling of the abbey bell. It was dreary enough, and so were his meditations; at the very moment when he seemed to have succeeded, misfortune again assailed him. He had staked his honor and his life upon the mission to Brussels, and he had executed it only to lose all that he had gained by this last trick of fate. It seemed as if peril, conspiracy, and murder had tracked his footsteps ever since the night when good Madame Michel had held him in her arms in the woods of Nançay, praying and weeping by turns over the bereaved infant. His peaceful childhood on the Rue de la Ferronnerie, the happiness of his boyhood with Condé, were after all but intervals in the drama of his eventful life. The hour, the rain, the lonely road, all depressed his usually buoyant spirits and chilled his blood;

he recalled a story which Jacques des Horloges was fond of reciting — of a noble family in which every male died a violent death. It required an effort to shake off his lethargy, to direct his attention to his horse, which stumbled more than once in the mire, and to concentrate his mind upon his errand. If Archambault's story was true, he had seven or eight hours the start of the conspirators, and it would go hard with him if he did not defeat them; in any event, there was a hope left, and that a strong one, that Père Matthieu would never be outwitted.

With all this, fate beset Péron on every side. He had been willing to sacrifice himself for Renée de Nançay, to endure an injustice rather than crush her with the shame of her father's villainy, but was he prepared to do the same for Madame de Bièvre? And why not? Had he ever dreamed of wedding mademoiselle? Surely not; to wed her he must proclaim his rank; and if he proclaimed it, they would be separated forever. Then, he argued, if he could not marry her, doubtless she would have married in any case, and why should he find it hard to shield her as a wife? Ah, but he did! The difference was there, and sharp enough to make him wince.

In the midst of these reflections there came a more common-place anxiety. His horse stumbled

again and went lame. He had saddled the beast in the dark, without making any examination of him, and he now realized his error; for if anything went wrong with the horse, he would meet with disastrous delays. He dismounted and tried to discover the trouble, but in vain; he was without means of making a light, and could not see. There was no alternative therefore but to resume his seat in the saddle and go on with caution until day-break; but he no longer dared to keep up the pace at which he had started, no matter how much he chafed under the delay. To change horses on the road was no part of his design, especially since the horse left behind would prove an excellent clew by which he could be tracked. This compelled him to spare the animal, and he was further impeded by the soft condition of the roads, still muddy from the heavy weather; so he made but poor progress, and was still a league from Chantilly when the black rain-clouds lifted in the east showing a keen line of silver, like the edge of a naked sword, where dawn cut the night in twain. Before him the woods of Chantilly took fantastic shapes through the mist, and around him the meadows were undulated like the gray billows of the ocean. The estate of Chantilly, once the property of the house of Montmorency, had been forfeited by the rebellion of the last unfortunate

duke and was now in the hands of the Princesse de Condé, a gift from the king.

As soon as the light was sufficient, Péron found that his horse was suffering from a loose shoe on one of his forefeet, and that the animal must be attended to before he could proceed on his journey to Flanders. This made it imperative for him to stop at the town in search of a smith, much against his own wishes; for he would be readily recognized if he came across any of the retainers of Condé, who were all more or less acquainted with the former protégé of the prince. However, there was no help for it, and making the best of a bad business he turned his horse's head toward the spot where he remembered that there used to be a smithy. He had no difficulty in finding the forge, but there was no fire; and the blacksmith was evidently asleep over his shop, for the place was quiet. Péron knocked so loudly, however, that he finally succeeded in rousing the inmates, and the smith came down with reluctance to answer his summons, having no wish to go to work so early.

"No horses will be shod here for two good hours," he said bluntly, eyeing his visitor from head to foot with a scowl of disapproval.

He was a big, brawny fellow; a Gascon from his tongue, and the smut on his face added to

his natural ugliness; but Péron remembered him as a not ill-natured retainer of Condé. A delay of two hours would be fatal to the musketeer's interests, and he did not hesitate to use every argument at his command.

"Do you not know me, Ferré?" he said; "you taught me once to shoe a horse, and it was from you that I first learned to strike a straight blow from the shoulder.

"Pardieu, 'tis monseigneur's boy!" exclaimed the smith, with a change of expression. "I did not know you, Péron, in your black cloak, and with the air you have of a great gentleman. So, 'tis you that cannot shoe your horse? You have forgotten some useful lessons, and I am minded to let you wait for your pains; I have had no breakfast, and I am not the man to work on an empty stomach."

"Yet do me this favor, good Ferré, for old times' sake," Péron urged; "I am bound on a pressing errand, and if I delay there may be bad results—for me."

The smith still hesitated, looking from the musketeer to his horse.

"Leave the beast with me," he said gruffly, "and get a new horse at the inn; you dress like a man with a purse."

"But it does not suit me to change horses,"

Péron replied; "and though I am not the rich man you take me for, I will pay well for this piece of work."

Ferré gave him a sharp look. "I see," he said bluntly, "you are either in mischief or some one else is—good, then, I will shoe the horse. But I care nothing for your money; I do this for old friendship."

"So you do it, I will not quarrel," Péron replied, relieved at his success; for Ferré was noted for his stubborn independence, and, at first, it seemed likely that he would do nothing until he was ready to begin his day's work,

The conciliation of the blacksmith was not the end of the trouble, however, for the fire must be built and the anvil prepared for the task. This meant no little delay, and while Ferré set about his business Péron decided to go to the inn and get something to eat, that there might be no further need of halting until noon. He had little apprehension of attracting any notice at the public house at that hour, and repaired thither at once. He was met with the same difficulty which had assailed him at the smithy; but here his purse prevailed, and in a little while he had procured a simple meal and eaten it in the solitude which he coveted. The delay had been sufficient to permit Ferré to make good progress, and when Péron

returned, the big blacksmith was putting the finishing touches to his work.

"There," he said, looking up as the young musketeer approached, "'t is well done, and the animal can travel now without discomfort; your city smiths make a poor show, if this was a sample."

"Not many men could hope to equal you, Ferré," Péron retorted, smiling; "I remember that M. de Condé thought no man could shoe a horse like you."

The blacksmith's face relaxed a little; he stood with his great arms folded while Péron mounted, and he would accept no pay.

"Keep your money," he said, with a shrug, "I fancy you are not so rich as I am, for all your fine clothes. I remember you, too, as a little lad in a blue taffety jacket well worn at the elbows; it would shame me to take a guerdon from you, boy." He paused, glancing down the road toward the château. "You have had a friend here looking for you," he added, "or a foe, I know not which."

Péron started. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"A man has been here in your absence," the smith replied, "and he seemed to know your horse; he asked where you were, but I would not tell him, and he took the road to the château."

"What sort of a man?" Péron asked, with a momentary thought of Choin which was destroyed by the answer.

"A man of middle size, fair, and, I think, a soldier," replied Ferré, "though he wore the dress of a merchant rather than a man-at-arms; and he was muffled in a green cloak and rode a dun-colored mare."

"I do not recognize the man as a friend," Péron remarked thoughtfully.

"A foe, most likely," retorted Ferré, with a shrug.

His auditor was absorbed in thought.

"Can I take a short cut from here to the high-road, and avoid the way by the château?" he asked at last.

"And so outstrip the green cloak?" asked Ferré, with a grim smile. "Ay, take yonder cut through the brushwood and ride into the forest. The way is easy enough, but you must ford the Thève."

Péron thanked him heartily and rode off at once, convinced now that the delay that had been forced upon him might be far more serious in its consequences than he had at first supposed. He did not recognize the description of the green-cloaked rider, but he felt certain that it was not a friend, and that his best chance was in an effort

to outstrip the stranger on the road or to overtake him; he trusted that he could easily dispose of a single antagonist. He took the path pointed out by Ferré and was soon in the depths of the forest of Chantilly, where once a year the festival of St. Hubert was celebrated. The heavy rain-clouds were dispersing, and by the time he had reached the Thève the sun was shining. In the peaceful depths of the forest it seemed impossible to look for conspirators; the new greens of spring clothed it with beautiful verdure, and on the mossy banks the violets were blooming, recalling to Péron the violets of Nançay and the little golden-haired girl who had tossed him a cluster. Here and there through green arcades he caught glimpses of the lakes of Commelle, and in the distance was the Château de la Loge, built by the mother of St. Louis. The sweet perfumes of the woodland were in the air, the moss was soft beneath his horse's feet, and overhead a bird's song cleft the stillness with a clear, sweet note of joy.

He avoided the village of Commelle, and came out upon the highroad at a spot where there were woods on either side and much brush and growth of vines which made a thicket. He cast a sharp glance at the mass of feathery trailing green and overhanging boughs, for it seemed the very place

for an ambuscade; but he saw nothing, and looking back down the road toward Chantilly there was no green cloak, and he believed that he had outwitted his pursuer. Congratulating himself on his success, he took the road between the thickets, only using the precaution of loosening his sword in its scabbard and drawing his pistol; but nothing stirred. He rode forward briskly, and had reached the turn where two paths met before anything occurred. Then there was a sudden crackling of boughs and underbrush, and in a moment he was surrounded, — one masked horseman on either side and one in front. In a moment or two they were joined by the man with the green cloak, whom Péron observed just as its wearer called to him to surrender. For reply the young soldier fired at the stranger, and so excellent was his aim that the man reeled in his saddle and the next moment lay on the ground, while his horse galloped off into the woods. A space was clear, and Péron urged his own horse forward, trusting to escape.

“Take the fool or kill him!” shouted one of his other assailants; and a bullet whistled close to his ear. Péron turned in his saddle and fired again, but missed, and his enemies were now all three close upon him.

His fate seemed sealed, and would have been but for a sudden diversion, — an assault from the

rear which compelled the three masks to defend themselves. There was a shout, a clash of swords, and Péron recognized Choin. Thankful now for Archambault's quick wit, Péron turned back to aid his rescuers and saw Choin shoot down the tall man who seemed to be the leader. For five minutes the fight was hot, but there were now but two to four, for the Italian had brought two comrades. Two of the miscreants lay dead or unconscious and the other two were readily secured. When the fight was over the fencing-master wiped his forehead.

"Pardieu!" he said, "we were in the nick of time. I have not had such fun since the cardinal made duelling a capital offence. What carrion have you there?" he added, seeing Péron examining the fallen men.

"'Tis a stranger to me," he replied, unmasking him of the green cloak. "I owe you my life, Choin. How came you so soon?"

"Archambault got us off two hours after you left," said the Italian; "and in sooth you do owe me your life, for I shot that tall ruffian yonder just as he was about to put a bullet through you. Who is the villain?"

Péron did not reply; he had just unfastened the dead man's mask and was looking, with mingled surprise and horror, on the dark, handsome face

that he could not forget, that he had seen last in the Palais Cardinal, the face of M. de Nançay. And on the dead man was the cardinal's ring.

"Mère de Dieu!" he said softly to himself, "my enemy — and her father!"

Choin had dismounted now and stood looking in the face of his victim, his own ruddy countenance growing paler as he gazed.

"Santa Maria purissima!" he exclaimed, relapsing into his mother tongue, "'t is that devil of a marquis whom monsignor let loose but now, and I am undone!"

Péron signed to him to speak lower and to keep his men away. When the two were alone with the body, he drew the fatal ring from the finger of Richelieu's foe, then he turned to the anxious Italian.

"This is a bad business, Choin," he said gravely, "and we must hide it until the story is told to the cardinal."

"Mon Dieu!" cried Choin, "the cardinal is the very devil when a man offends him; I would a thousand times rather face King Louis."

Péron had been thinking hard; his perplexities increased at every turn, but he had only one sharp anxiety and that was for mademoiselle.

"Choin," he said, "I must stay here with the body; take therefore your two prisoners and your

men and go to Ferré, the blacksmith at Chantilly; he will help you to hide the prisoners there, for my sake, and he will come with you to take these two bodies. One can lie at Chantilly, but the other must go to Paris."

The Italian was too alarmed and worried to gainsay the younger man, and he seemed glad to escape, even for a while, the presence of the dead man. He and his men helped to drag the two bodies out of sight and caught the horses; then, with their prisoners, they rode off to Chantilly, leaving Péron on guard with the dead and tormented with his own anxieties.

Never did two hours seem longer than the two which elapsed before he saw Choin and Ferré coming again with two litters for the corpses, borne, as he soon learned, by the big blacksmith's trusted apprentices; for Choin's two men had stayed to guard the prisoners. The dead marquis and his servant were taken secretly through the forest and concealed in a shed behind the blacksmith's forge until nightfall, when they could be brought quietly to Paris. But Péron did not wait for this; he left them in charge of Choin, and spurred on to the city to tell his story to the cardinal. That was not the first thing he did, however; instead, he rode to the church of St. Nicholas de Champs, where he found Père An-

toine and told him of Nançay's death, begging him to go at once to the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre to break the heavy tidings to mademoiselle. Archambault had already carried Péron's letter, and the story was not wholly a surprise to the priest; but he listened without comment. When the young musketeer concluded with his appeal for the orphan girl, Père Antoine's blue eyes were suddenly lifted from the ground and looked searchingly into his face.

"My son," he said gently, "it is well that this man's death does not seem to have filled your heart with the satisfied lust of vengeance, and that at such an hour your thoughts are of mercy and peace."

Péron's honest face flamed scarlet and he looked back steadfastly into the priest's kind eyes.

"Mon père," he said, with the ingenuous frankness of a boy, "I fear that it is not altogether Christian mercy which has changed my heart."

Père Antoine smiled.

"Jehan," he said softly, "love entering into a man's heart is either its crucifixion or its crown, and sometimes it is both. I will go this hour to Mademoiselle de Nançay, and I am deeply thankful that it was Choin who killed him; it might have been —" He crossed himself, murmuring a prayer of thanksgiving, to which Péron said amen with a lighter heart.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN ACT OF JUSTICE

AFTER leaving Père Antoine, Péron stopped only long enough at his lodgings to remove the stains of travel, and still wearing his plain suit of dark blue taffety, he bent his steps toward the Palais Cardinal. His perplexities and adventures had been so numerous in the last few hours that he tried to keep his thoughts from them that his mind might be clear to deal with his exacting patron. He could not conjecture what would be Richelieu's reception of the tidings, but he anticipated a sharp reprimand for the loss of the ring even though it was recovered. As for M. de Nançay's death, he suspected that it would not be unwelcome to monsignor, for he was not wholly blind to the natural results which the wily Italian must have expected on the day on which he posted Péron in Catherine de' Medici's clock, after revealing the secret of his father's execution. Nor did he fear any trouble for Choin; he knew the cardinal to be just, if remorselessly stern. However, the prospect of the interview was far from pleasing,

and he walked slowly through the gardens behind the palace, noting the lime-trees and wondering which one had shaded M. de Nançay and M. de Vesson at their conference which monsignor's eavesdropper had overheard. Péron only partially divined the extent of the plot which he had helped to reveal; he did not know that it was but the forerunner of a greater one which would bring M. le Grand to the block, and that Monsieur, the queen-mother, and M. de Bouillon were but hatching another conspiracy on the wreck of the lesser one.

Péron entered the palace by a back staircase and found his way to Father Joseph la Tremblaye. To him he briefly recited the whole matter, keeping nothing back and saying nothing to extenuate his own fault in failing to deliver the ring immediately on his return from Brussels. Father Joseph listened without comment, merely bidding the young musketeer await the cardinal's pleasure where he was, and giving no indication of what he might expect.

Péron waited a long time after the priest retired, and he walked to and fro in the small room — which was Father Joseph's closet — trying to conjecture what would happen next. The situation was so peculiar, the policy of the court so fluctuating, that he knew not what might be the end.

M. de Nançay was dead, and Father Joseph had the ring, — but what might not be the results of such a web of conspiracy? Well did he know that there would be a scapegoat, and why should it not be he? There was no one to interfere, and it might be the most convenient way in which to hush up a great scandal. He was therefore in a gloomy frame of mind when one of the cardinal's ushers, clad in the livery worn at the levées, came to summon him to attend upon monsignor. He noticed the man's elaborate dress with surprise; but as the man was a new member of the household, he asked no questions, but followed him in silence. As they passed rapidly through the apartments which led to the eastern gallery where Richelieu most frequently received his visitors, Péron noticed that the guards were all on duty, and that there was an unusual stir in the palace. He could not imagine why he should be summoned to this public place for a private interview, nor could he account for the deferential manner of his conductor. At the door of the salon stood two of his comrades, the cardinal's musketeers, and both saluted at his approach. The usher opened the door and Péron entered the great gallery alone. He halted at the threshold, convinced that there was some mistake, — that he was not wanted here. The long apartment, furnished with the

magnificence of royalty, was thronged with noble-men and princes and great ladies of the court. Péron stepped back in confusion, and addressed the usher.

"Friend, you have blundered," he said; "the cardinal does not send for his musketeer at such a time as this."

The usher shook his head, standing before the door that Péron might not escape.

"My orders are precise, monsieur," he replied; "you are to await monsignor's pleasure here."

"You must be in error," Péron persisted angrily, for he felt many curious eyes upon him.

"You are M. Jehan de Calvisson, are you not?" asked the usher quietly.

"Ay, blockhead!" retorted Péron with impatience, "but I am only the cardinal's musketeer, and here are half the *grandees* of France."

"My orders are precise," said the other stubbornly, "and by St. Denis you shall not leave until monsignor comes."

Péron shrugged his shoulders. "On your own head be it!" he said; "'t is a stupid blunder."

The usher shut his lips tightly and stood his ground, so that there was no alternative for Péron. He could not engage in a brawl with a servant in such an assembly, and was forced to stand there in his plain dress, amidst the gay throng, where

every man wore satin or velvet, and the women were as gayly attired as the roses in a June garden. He looked down the long gallery, observing the scene with curiosity and frequent surprises, as he notèd first one and then another of the guests. There was M. de Soissons, known to be unfavorable to Richelieu, and Madame d'Effiat, the mother of Cinq Mars, and yonder was the Prince de Condé, and M. de Montbazon. In a throng in the center of the room was Monsieur, clad in white satin, his breast covered with jewels and his long curls falling on his shoulders. Péron looked at him with strange recollections of the adventurer in the house at Poissy, of the poltroon who had been ready to sacrifice all his friends at Ruel, to save himself. Monsieur, however, was calm and smiling, the picture of his true self, — selfish, indolent, and unstable, with nothing of his father in him.

All these great personages whispered and laughed and made merry, awaiting the entrance of the cardinal, who, rumor said, was ill and not likely to be better, though the indomitable spirit would not yield. There were many there who heard this talk not only without regret but with much secret joy. They hated him as heartily as they feared him, and would have come to his funeral with greater joy than to his levées. Yet on every side there were expressions of anxiety

for monsignor's health and of almost tender regard at its delicate condition; for it is the world's profession to lie, and to lie gracefully.

The atmosphere of the crowded place, the murmur of ceaseless talk, the gay indifference of these creatures, who courted power for the love of it, all oppressed Péron. His simple childhood, his hardy training, had made him dislike such scenes and feel their mockery, knowing as he did how often the cardinal had been deserted when he seemed tottering to his fall, how quickly he would be deserted now if the king's favor failed him. He recollected hearing Madame Michel tell of the death of the gay favorite, Albert de Luynes, and how for one day or more his body lay neglected, and his grooms played cards upon his bier.

Suddenly the door at the other end of the gallery opened, and an usher cried loudly: "The cardinal! the cardinal!"

There was a stir, necks were craned, skirts rustled, fans swayed; great dignitaries jostled one another to see if this man was indeed near death. The gay throng parted in the middle, leaving a long aisle down which monsignor slowly walked, leaning heavily on Father Joseph. Richelieu was ill indeed, and his step was heavy, like that of a man who bore a burden, but the indomitable

spirit was unquenched; his face showed white as a corpse in contrast to his blood-red robes, but his dark eyes glowed with wonderful brilliancy, as though the fires of his soul burned brighter as the body weakened. To look at the great minister was to be convinced that while the flesh was mortal, the soul was indeed immortal. He came slowly, pausing to speak first to one and then another, but without a smile, his cold, proud manner losing nothing of its hauteur by momentary intercourse with others. He who trusted no man, and knew and manipulated hundreds, had only a deep suspicion and disdain for the sycophants who fawned upon his feet at one hour and were ready to cut his throat the next. The great cardinal, — the Huguenot cardinal as he has been called, because he was great enough to be at once liberal and far-sighted, — who loved France as he also loved power, knew the men with whom he had to deal.

He came so slowly down the gallery that it seemed a long time to Péron before those dark eyes lighted upon him; but no sooner did the cardinal see his musketeer than he beckoned to him. Then facing around, he looked back at the gay throng, laying his hand on the young musketeer's shoulder. There was a pause, every eye turning toward these two standing together, in strange

contrast, before the crowded room. It was very still when Richelieu spoke in a clear voice that penetrated every corner of the gallery and was heard by the guards at the doors.

"My friends," he said, leaning heavily on Péron, "but lately I told you of a great wrong done to a noble gentleman. It is now my duty to announce to you his majesty's pleasure in regard to the son. I present to you, therefore, Jehan François de Calvisson, Marquis de Nançay."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CHANGE OF FORTUNE

IT was the evening of the day following that on which Péron was proclaimed Marquis de Nançay, and he sat at a small table in the pastry shop on the Rue des Petits Champs. He was waiting for Père Antoine, who had promised to meet him there with tidings of mademoiselle. Pilâtre de Marsou, the late M. de Nançay, had been privately buried from the Church of St. Nicholas des Champs, no one following his corpse to the cemetery but his daughter and M. de Vesson — so easily is a fallen man deserted, even at the last hour. Péron was anxious to hear of Renée, to know how she had received the tidings of the fearful change in her rank and condition, and to be assured that she fully understood that he was innocent of her father's death. All these things Père Antoine had undertaken, promising to comfort mademoiselle in her affliction, and to clear the new marquis of blame. With all his confidence in the good father, Péron was uneasy and perplexed. He would gladly have gone to

Renée in her trouble had not delicacy forbidden an intrusion, but he had sent one message to her by Père Antoine, and that was to assure her that both the Château de Nançay and the house on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, though properly his, were at her service for an indefinite period, and that her possession would not be disturbed. However, he knew mademoiselle well enough to expect only a proud defiance of his kindness, though his heart ached for the houseless and penniless orphan whom the grim justice of the cardinal had put in the place that he had occupied when a poor boy on the Rue de la Ferronnerie, dependent on the charity of Jacques des Horloges.

Certainly a great change had come over his own circumstances since the announcement in the gallery of the Palais Cardinal. He had been received with flattering demonstrations of friendship; princes and great ladies, noblemen and courtiers, had crowded around him with effusive cordiality. The unknown musketeer of monsignor's guard was the lion of the Marais. All the morning he had been beset with pages and serving-men bearing invitations. M. le Marquis was wanted to dine, to sup, to dance, to play cards, to hunt; the cardinal had presented him to the king; the queen had given him her hand to kiss;

M. le Grand had greeted him as a long-lost friend; Monsieur had smiled, forgetful of the house in Poissy; and the Prince de Condé had shown genuine pleasure in his former protégé's good fortune. It was overwhelming and a little bewildering; but none of it pleased the new marquis so much as the tearful joy of good Madame Michel, the honest delight of Jacques des Horloges and Archambault, and above all the blessing of Père Antoine.

Archambault received him that evening with open arms, setting forth his best wine and most choice dishes for his old patron's son; but Péron discouraged all display, pleading his desire to be for a while unobserved. He wore his plain suit of clothes,—the same which he had bought for his journey to Flanders,—and being still but little known among the gay set frequenting the pastry shop, he was allowed an hour of quiet, sitting unobserved in a corner of the public room where he could most easily watch for Père Antoine. As the evening advanced the place filled rapidly, and in the bustle and confusion he escaped notice. It was a meeting-place of fashion, and on every side the new marquis was surrounded with his future associates and with the train of sycophants and little people who follow and imitate the leaders. Sitting in his quiet corner he observed

the scene with more interest than usual. Was he indeed now one of these? It did not seem possible. He had none of the characteristics of these darlings of fortune; here were faces as carefully painted and powdered as women, curled and scented hair, white jewelled hands, and dress of the most flashy as well as the most elegant fashion of the day. The musketeer looked down at his own broad, brown hands and the mighty strength of his arm, and smiled; he was certainly no match for the curled and painted fops of the Louvre. The room was full now; M. de Condé was yonder with M. de Soissons; there, too, was M. de Bassompierre, and Montbazon, and fifty more. Near Péron were three young exquisites, dining together, and his attention was first drawn to them by hearing his own name. They were discussing the scene at the Palais Cardinal, which was the gossip of the hour, and Péron would have closed his ears had he not caught a sentence which riveted his attention.

"'Tis a strange trick of fortune," remarked one of the group; "what think you of it, M. de Bièvre?"

"That it is a bit of cursed ill-luck," he retorted curtly, "and that I wish Pilâtre de Nançay had shot the varlet at Chantilly."

This, then, was Renée's fiancée. Péron looked at

him curiously, and saw only a slightly made man with good features and a cold expression, with long curls falling about his face, and with a dress in the height of fashion, ruffles of rich lace at throat and wrists and knees, and his fingers glittering with jewels. He looked in a sullen mood and scowled at his companions, who seemed bent on teasing him.

"Ah, the shoe pinches!" said the first speaker, laughing. "Mademoiselle loses not only her father but her name and her fortune. Did you know how he came to his title?"

"No," replied de Bièvre angrily; "I may be a fool, but I am not a rogue; I would have let him alone had I suspected. Monsignor keeps these secrets to spring them to our torment. Curse him, had I known he was no marquis, de Nançay might have rotted ere I gave him any promises. You were the man who introduced me, M. d'Étienne, and I do not thank you."

"I did not know the facts," M. d'Étienne hastened to say. He was the third one of the party, and he had not spoken before. "'Tis unfortunate, but Pilâtre was a clever man and brave, and his daughter's beauty may, in a measure, compensate you for her father's sins."

"St. Denis! do you take me for a fool?" asked de Bièvre, with a sneer.

"You do not care for the beauty without the rank and fortune, then?" suggested the younger man.

"I do not care a jot for the fortune," M. de Bièvre said loudly, for he was angry; "but do you take me to be fool enough to marry Mademoiselle de Nançay—the daughter of a rogue, and like enough taking her father's faults? Mon Dieu! I told the girl yesterday that I would never wed the beggarly child of a villain!"

Péron rose from his chair and suddenly stood towering above the speaker, his face ablaze with passion.

"M. de Bièvre," he said, "a word with you."

The nobleman surveyed him from head to foot with a scornful glance, taking in every detail of the musketeer's plain dress and almost shabby appearance compared with the others there.

"I am M. de Bièvre," he drawled indifferently; "and what is that to you?"

Péron's cheek flushed scarlet under the other's insolent stare.

"I am Jehan de Calvisson," he said haughtily, "and I heard you but now speak lightly of a young lady in this public place. Monsieur, you will either apologize as publicly, or you will answer for it to me."

It was evident that de Bièvre and his party

were taken by surprise; but the former only sneered.

"And who are you?" he demanded tauntingly, — "a poor knave with whom my late fiancée has doubtless amused herself in her leisure moments—"

He said no more, for Péron had him by the collar, lifting him easily from his chair. Bièvre struggled, but it was too late; Péron had him about the waist now and flung him over the table, and he lay like a log.

His friends sprang up with a great outcry, and the crowded room was in a tumult, but no man laid a finger on Péron. He stood where he had seized his antagonist, his own face deeply flushed and his eyes sparkling with anger.

"Seize him," cried M. de Étienne; "he has injured M. de Bièvre — he is a ruffian!"

But something in Péron's face and his appearance of great strength kept the eager crowd at bay. In the farther corners they sprang upon the tables and on window-sills to gaze at him and at the unconscious form of the nobleman, but no one attempted to arrest him.

"I am the Marquis de Nançay," he said in a firm voice, looking about him at the ring of curious faces, "and I threw that man over the table for speaking lightly of a noble lady. Any

man who wishes to take his part, let him come on, and I will pitch him after his friend."

There was silence for a moment and then a sudden burst of applause.

"Bien!" cried Condé, "throw them all, Péron, it reminds me of Choin's defeat in the tennis court. Pardieu! I will see that you have fair play."

"And I!" cried M. de Bassompierre loudly, "for yonder fellow was at best a cowardly fop. But for the cardinal you might have settled it on the Place Royale; monsignor has left us no appeal save to our fists."

"I am Soissons," said the prince, advancing, "and by St. Denis! it was the cleverest throw that I have seen. There is my hand on it, M. de Nançay."

"I was not so clever as I intended," Péron replied dryly, "it should have broken his neck."

Following the lead of the Prince de Condé, M. de Soissons, and M. de Bassompierre, the throng of courtiers were eager to honor the new marquis.

"Monsieur is a famous wrestler," cried one, edging closer to Péron.

"You have the arm of Goliath, M. le Marquis," remarked another, a little man, who smiled above great ruffles of lace.

"I thank you, monsieur," Péron replied, with a smile; "I am content to be Goliath as long as you do not prove to be a David."

"Your wit is keen and your arm is long, M. de Nançay!" cried another admirer, while two or three thrust themselves forward with invitations.

"Monsieur will dine with me to-morrow?"

"Sup with me, M. le marquis?"

"Nay, with me, for I sent a note this morning, M. de Nançay."

"Mon Dieu!" Péron ejaculated, with impatience. "Gentlemen, you overwhelm me. But yesterday I was a poor musketeer, dining where I could best afford it. Give me a fortnight, messieurs, to get the stomach of a grandee!"

He pressed through the crowd to the door, putting aside a dozen flatterers upon the way, and in the street he was stopped again by a little man who was dressed in the excess of fashion and who bowed with profound respect.

"M. le marquis," he said humbly but with a confidential manner, "I am Louis le Gros, the famous tailor of the Marais. I serve the king and Monsieur and M. le Grand. I pray you let me set you out as becomes your station, sir; and, pardon me — but the fit of your coat is very bad — very bad indeed!"

For the first time Péron laughed.

“Good, M. le Gros,” he said, “you shall make me a suit; and make it large, for verily I shall gain in flesh now that I have gained in rank. I thank you for being the first man to tell me the truth in twenty-four hours!”

CHAPTER XXIX

MADEMOISELLE'S DISAPPEARANCE

PÈRE ANTOINE did not keep his appointment; in fact he was in sore perplexity between mademoiselle and Péron. Knowing the thoughts and impulses of both and pledged not to betray either, the good father found his situation full of pitfalls. He was bound to keep Renée's secrets, although he thought that he could serve her best by revealing them, partially at least. He reproached himself too, with deception, when he went to his rooms on the Rue de Bethisi and left Péron to wait for him in vain. But what could he do? Not betray mademoiselle certainly, and he had promised to give her time. The priest, whose heart was as simple as a child's with all his wisdom, crept up the stairs to his study with the air of a guilty man. He lighted only one taper and drew a heavy curtain before the window, the more completely to deceive any observer. He sat down there among his books and looked about him with dreamy eyes. His thoughts were back in the old days when he was a young man, and when between

him and more serious things shone the brown eyes of the Marquise de Nançay, then Françoise de la Douane. He remembered the tenderness of it all, the sweetness and the pain—which had lingered with him through long years, until the wound no longer ached and there was only the scar. If it had been more of earth and less spiritual there would have been an end of it long before; but Père Antoine was one of those who can suffer so keenly that no pain ever comes to them blunted, and when their cup of sorrow fills, it runs over. It is not the flesh but the spirit that grieves.

He sat with his beautiful hands crossed on his knee and the light of the taper shining softly on his white hair and into his large blue eyes. He thought not only of Françoise de la Douane but of her son, the orphan boy whom he had watched over and trained in all those years on the Rue de la Ferronnerie; he remembered the days of anxiety when he and the three faithful servants had all dreaded Pilâtre de Marsou; he remembered the cardinal's sharp cross-examination when the boy was taken into his household, and his own doubts and fears; and now it was all over and the heir happily restored to title and estates. It was certainly a cause for happiness and triumph, and yet Père Antoine's heart was freshly touched by sympathy. He had seen the reverse side of the

picture; he had been the bearer of the evil tidings to Renée de Nançay; he had stood beside the bier of the forsaken and disgraced marquis. A strange fate had called the same man who had walked to the scaffold with the true Marquis de Nançay, to render the last services also to the usurper of the same title and place. He had buried both the victim and his false accuser, and now he stood in the office of counsellor and friend to the son of one and the daughter of the other. It spoke clearly for the man's honesty, his piety, his tenderness, that he could do these things without betraying any one.

He was not to escape Péron that night however. The episode at Archambault's pastry-shop sent the new marquis out in quest of Père Antoine, and failing to find him at other places, he went, at last, to the Rue de Bethisi. And just as the priest thought he had evaded him, he heard his step on the stairs. He knew that step well, for he had listened for it often and found a comfort in looking at the likeness that he saw in the boy's face, which did not depart even with manhood. He did not stir from his chair, but waited quietly for the door to open, and Péron uttered an exclamation of surprise when he saw him sitting there.

"I thought you were coming to Archambault's?" he said. "Have you seen mademoiselle?"

Père Antoine hesitated a moment before he replied.

"I have not seen her since last night," he said quietly; "she has left the house on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre."

"Has she gone to Nançay?" Péron asked quickly.

The priest shook his head, avoiding the eager eyes of his interrogator.

Péron sat down opposite, looking at him searchingly, the truth dawning upon him.

"Surely, mon père," he said, "you have not allowed her to leave her old home like this?"

"My son, I could not prevent it," the priest replied simply, "nor do I see how it could have been prevented; mademoiselle could not be a pensioner upon your bounty."

"Nay, but to turn her out for me!" cried Péron, rising and walking to and fro. "St. Denis! I feel like a ruffian and a thief."

"And yet, Jehan, you must remember that mademoiselle might have encountered worse treatment," Père Antoine replied. "Monsignor had Pilâtre de Marcon in his toils; he let him go, only as he has let others go, that there might be stronger evidence against him. Independently of his action in regard to your father, Marsou would have been ruined and possibly beheaded. Renée realizes

this herself; she bears you no ill will, and appreciated your intended kindness."

"Ah, mon père, you do not know how it is," Péron said; "for you reason is sufficient, for me there must be something more!"

Père Antoine smiled sadly. "Young people fall readily into the error of thinking their case exceptional," he said gently, "yet there is nothing new under the sun."

Péron, who had been pacing the room, suddenly halted in front of him.

"Tell me," he said, "where is she?"

Père Antoine averted his eyes. "My son," he replied, "I am not at liberty to tell you."

The younger man frowned. "Come, come!" he said with impatience, "surely there is no need for concealment; it is not possible that she fears me."

"She has retired into a privacy not unjustified by her mourning and her position," the priest answered. "I cannot tell you more without violating my word."

"Am I so hateful to her that she does not wish to see me?" exclaimed the other, in a pained tone.

Père Antoine smiled involuntarily as he shook his head.

"Nay," he said, "but the wound is new, and

the lightest touch hurts. You do not know, nor I, what she has had to bear."

"One thing I do know," Péron said, "she is free of a rogue;" and he told the priest of M. de Bièvre's talk at Archambault's.

"And you threw him over the table?" Père Antoine said slowly. "Well, my son, violence is not good; and yet you could do no less. He lied too, for mademoiselle herself set him free at the first tidings of her changed fortunes. It was a match of her father's making, not hers, and I think that her deliverance from it is one bright spot in the dark clouds of trouble."

"Yet you will not tell me where she is?" Péron said.

"I cannot," the priest replied, with a smile.

"But I will find her, for all that," the young musketeer declared firmly. "I will find her, if I have to scour Paris, from one end to the other; ay, if I have to scour all France!"

"From that I cannot deter you," Père Antoine replied quietly; "I am bound by my promise not to tell you where she has gone, but I can assure you that she is safe."

"Never mind, mon père," Péron replied; "I will find her in spite of you."

But he found this no easy task, although he set about it with much zeal. Mademoiselle had dis-

appeared completely; she had left no trace behind her at either house, and the servants of the late marquis had deserted their places at the first tidings of his fall, as rats leave a sinking ship. No one knew and no one seemed to care where the orphan daughter had gone; some corner of Paris had engulfed her and showed no sign. Believing that the woman Ninon would be faithful to her mistress, Péron searched for her, but in vain; she also had disappeared completely, leaving no trace behind. Not only did he search for her, but he enlisted the interest of Jacques des Horloges, whose apprentices went into nearly every house of any importance in the city. He set inquiries afoot at Archambault's; he went from one quarter to another, but no one knew where she had gone.

Days passed into weeks, weeks into months; St. Thomas's day had come and he had not found her. He was now overwhelmed with courtesies; he was wanted at one fête and another. The new marquis who had been a musketeer was the lion of the hour; the story of his courage and address and his romantic life was whispered in the Louvre and at the Palais Cardinal; great lords and princes greeted him as an equal, great ladies stopped their carriages to speak to him in the street. The king was gracious to him, the cardinal made a favorite of him. Gossip told with unction of the occurrence

at Archambault's cook-shop and how M. de Bièvre was thrown over a table like a sack of salt.

Péron had laid aside the uniform of a musketeer and assumed a dress befitting his rank, and Madame Michel would not permit any one else to do up his lace collar and ruffles or to keep his fine clothes in order. Her broad, brown face beamed with pride at the sight of the handsome marquis, and nothing could exceed her happiness when he came to sup with them in the room behind the shop on the Rue de la Ferronnerie. She made great preparations as for a prince, and on the table was a plate of rissoles, such as he had loved in the old days, when it was one of his privileges to go to the pastry-shop.

But all these things did not bring mademoiselle any nearer, nor could he wring her secret from Père Antoine, though he was a constant visitor at the Rue de Bethisi and often accompanied the priest on his walks through Paris. But with all his persuasion and persistence he gained nothing; Père Antoine made no sign to guide him, and Péron was, at last, almost in despair. M. de Nançay had been killed at Chantilly in the spring; summer had passed and autumn; it lacked but two days of Christmas and he had not yet found Renée, nor did he seem likely to find her.

CHAPTER XXX

THE HOUSE ON THE RUE DE PARADIS

THERE was one thing that Péron noticed in his walks with Père Antoine — whom he had followed like a shadow — and that was that they passed so frequently through the Rue du Chaume, although it was not always the shortest way to their destination. It was indeed more often out of their way, yet the priest would walk slowly through that street from the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes to the Rue de Paradis, though he had to turn back to the church of St. François d'Assisi. This peculiarity in Père Antoine's conduct finally aroused Péron's suspicions; he said nothing to the priest, but he too walked through this quarter, scanning the houses. On the corner of the Rue du Chaume and the Rue de Paradis was the Hôtel de Guise, built originally for the Connétable de Clisson, a great house with gardens which reached the Rue Charlot in the rear. Across from this, on the other corner of the Rue de Paradis, was a smaller and plainer building with a turret which commanded the Rue du Chaume. On either side of the street

were houses, some grim and some gracious, but all inscrutable to Péron; nor could he discover any reason for Père Antoine's predilection. After a careful examination of the exteriors, he made some inquiries about the inmates, but none were satisfactory. He had not relaxed his efforts to find mademoiselle, but he was disheartened; he had heard a rumor at Archambault's that she had gone to an aunt in Languedoc, and he began to believe that there was truth in this report. He tried to devour his chagrin in silence, and told himself constantly that he must be odious in her eyes, as the man who had first been almost a jailer, and had carried her against her will to Poissy, and now took possession of her name and estate.

It was the day before Christmas, and Péron had been with Père Antoine to the church of St. François d'Assisi. They were coming away when he saw a familiar figure among the crowd leaving the church; he could not be mistaken in the walk and dress of the woman; it was Ninon. Without a word, he left Père Antoine and hurried after her. His first impulse was to accost her, but remembering her uncertain temper, he determined to follow her, convinced that she would show him the way to mademoiselle. The woman had no suspicion of being followed; she was alone and walking rapidly, evidently in haste to reach her destination.

Péron suited his pace to hers, keeping on the opposite side of the street and some distance in the rear. She made straight for the Rue de Quatre Fils, and Péron's spirits rose as he saw her turn into the Rue du Chaume. She kept close to the wall of the gardens of the Hôtel de Guise and walked rapidly along to the other corner of the Rue de Paradis. Here she paused and looked sharply up and down the street but apparently without observing him, and then she entered the house with the turret.

Péron did not hesitate, but quickening his steps was at the door a few moments after she had disappeared. As luck would have it, she had left it ajar, and pushing it open he walked boldly into a narrow hall with stairs ascending directly in front of him. Here he paused to listen for a possible indication of her whereabouts, and hearing a door overhead open and close, he no longer hesitated, but ascended the stairs. At the top were two doors, one to the right and one to the left, and he stood again in doubt, but only for a moment. A slight noise as of some one moving in the room to the left decided him; he tapped smartly on the door, and a woman's voice bade him "Come in." He opened the door gently and saw a small, plain room lighted by one window, near which stood Renée de Nançay alone. Mademoiselle, in a plain

black robe, her golden hair coiled loosely at the nape of her neck and her face as white as a lily, looked at him in intense surprise.

"At last I have found you!" he cried, forgetting all but his joy at the sight of her.

"You must pardon me, M. le Marquis," she said, sweeping him a curtsey, "I did not look for visitors."

The formality of her tone and her proud manner, reminding him of their first encounter on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, chilled him. He reflected that it was possible that she was not only not glad to see him but actually displeased. The thought that he had thrust himself upon her covered him with confusion.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I sent a message to you through Père Antoine and I was deeply pained that you thought it best to quit your house on my account."

"Not my house, monsieur, but yours," she answered with proud calm.

"Yours," he said softly, "for I have never set foot in either since you left them, Mademoiselle de Nançay."

"You give me a false name," she said, and there was a break in her voice; "I am Renée de Marsou. It is you who are a de Nançay."

"I am Péron the musketeer," he answered

gently, "for I will never bear the title save under one condition."

There was a pause; she stood proudly, her golden head erect and her eyes upon the ground, while he looked at her with a flushed face, embarrassed and uncertain; the old gulf seemed to have yawned between them. He did not realize his own exaltation and her mortification; she seemed to him still the great demoiselle and he the soldier of fortune.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "it pains me to think how you must interpret my conduct. It seems as if I came to your house on the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre —"

"To your house, M. le Marquis," she corrected him quickly.

"Nay, to yours," he went on, "with the intention of driving you out of your own, that I must have seemed a ruffian when I escorted you to Poissy, that you must look upon me as one who planned your misfortune."

She gave him a quick glance from under her long dark lashes and then looked down again demurely.

"You are mistaken, monsieur," she said, "the cardinal himself told me that you did not wish to claim your own. It is I who should feel reproach though I am innocent; but Mère de Dieu! my father —"

She broke off, covering her face with her hands. Péron looked at her with shining eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly, "there is only one thing that makes me rejoice in my rank."

She looked up through her tears. "There is usually much cause for joy in such a case," she said.

"But not in mine," he answered softly. "When we first met at Nançay I was the clockmaker's boy, and there seemed a great gulf fixed between the mistress of Nançay and a poor orphan; and ever since that day it has remained until now, mademoiselle, when I also can claim noble birth."

He paused, and she did not reply, but the color of a rose glowed faintly in her pale face.

"Mademoiselle," he said very low, "can you forgive me? Can you let me speak the truth? The clockmaker's boy, the musketeer, and the marquis—all three are one in their love for you."

"M. le Marquis," she said proudly, "you say this to me because you pity my condition. I am a friendless orphan, the child of a disgraced father, with only a stained name to bear; I am no longer Renée de Nançay."

"I told you but now," he said, "that I would never bear my title except on one condition, and that, mademoiselle, is that you bear it too."

Unless you will be the Marquise de Nançay, I will be still Péron the musketeer."

She stood looking at him, her face turning from red to white and her lips trembling.

"M. le Marquis," she cried, with a sudden outburst of passionate emotion, "you pity me!"

He caught her hands and covered them with kisses.

"Renée," he said, "I love you! Have you no love for me?"

She hung her head. "Monsieur," she said, "you forget my father and yours!"

"Renée," he answered tenderly, "I love you, and that suffices." He drew her toward him, trying to look into her face. "My darling," he whispered, "do you scorn the marquis too?"

She looked up into his face, her own aglow despite the tears in her eyes.

"It was not a marquis I loved," she answered very low, "but—the cardinal's musketeer!"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her, and in their happiness they did not hear a step without nor see the door open gently as Père Antoine looked in. They were standing in the middle of the room, and the sunshine touched her golden hair and illuminated Péron's glowing face.

Père Antoine hastily closed the door and went down the stairs. He was smiling, and there was a

tender light in his blue eyes. It was not until he reached the street door that he wiped a tear from his cheek and crossed himself. He had had a gentle vision of Françoise de Nançay, as he saw her last, with little Jehan in her arms, and the old wound ached ; but then he looked up and saw the sun shining and remembered that to-morrow was Christmas.

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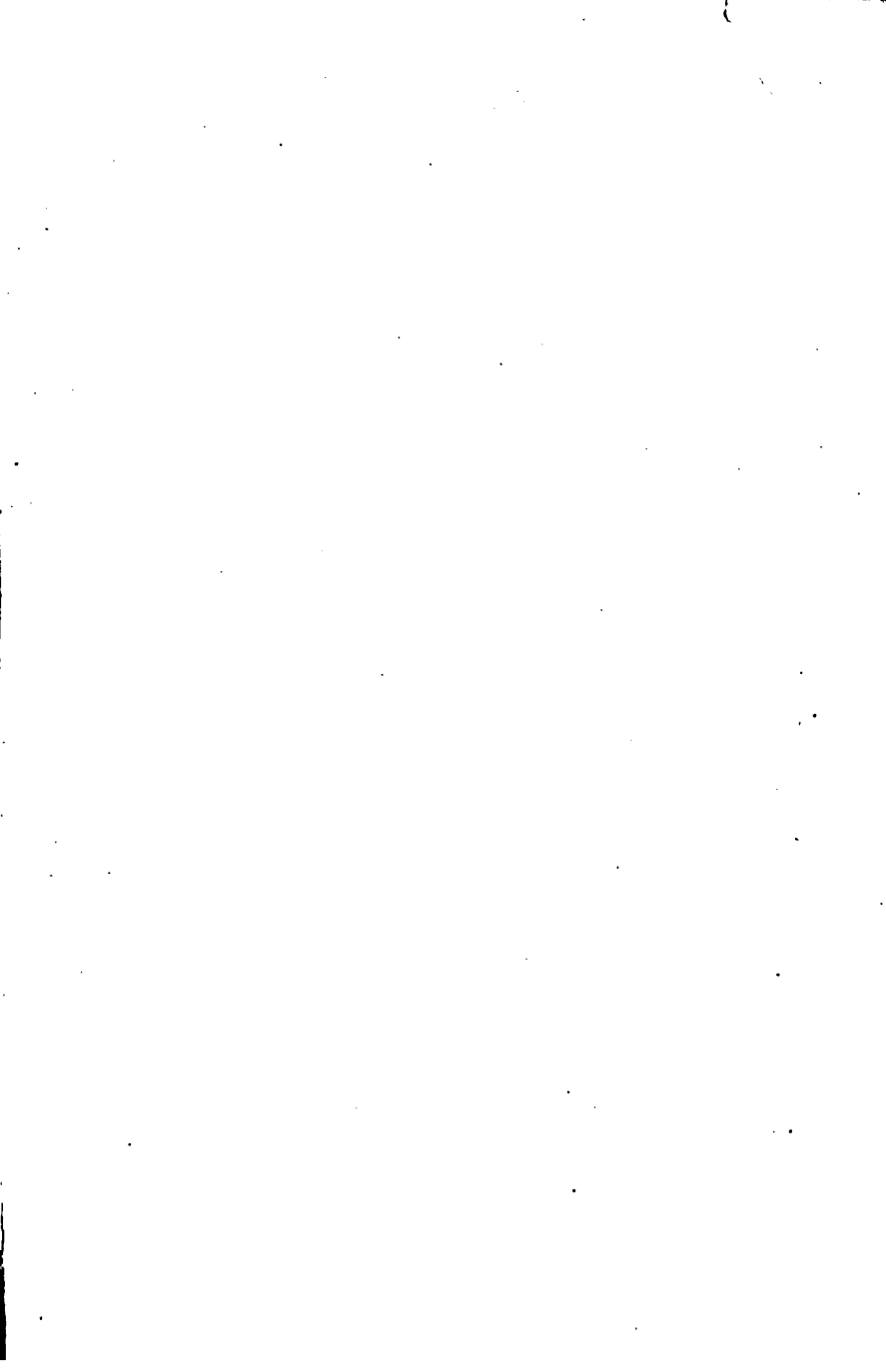
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